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I'd Rather Have a Cat Than a Harem!

Reincarnated into the
World of an Otome Game
as a Cat-loving Villainess



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I'd Rather Have a Cat than a Harem! Reincarnated into the World of an Otome Game as a Cat-loving Villainess Volume 1

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I'd Rather Have a Cat than a Harem! Reincarnated into the World of an Otome Game as a Cat-loving Villainess

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Prologue: Remembering the Past

LIFE can be rather unpredictable. Some days are inexplicably wonderful, while others are completely unremarkable.

On this particular day, Amy, the daughter of the Earl of Northland, was having a very “off” day.

It all started when she woke up feeling rather disoriented. Amy had a hunch it had something to do with a dream that roused her around daybreak, but when she tried to remember the details, it was as if they were obscured by a thick layer of fog. That murkiness was the only thing she could discern.

At breakfast, Amy accidentally burned her tongue on tea. And later, despite searching far and wide, she could not find the handkerchief she had worked so hard on embroidering for a homework assignment.

It was later discovered that the handkerchief had been accidentally put in her brother’s luggage, which he had taken back to his dormitory at school, but Amy was gently scolded by her governess all the same.

As if that wasn’t enough, Amy’s least favorite dish, liver pâté, was served for lunch... But the worst was yet to come that very evening.

Amy’s father, the Earl of Northland, served as the director of technology at the Institute of Magic, an organization under the direct control of the royal palace. His work involved developing magical tools. Every day he would come home late—after endless meetings, research experiments, and prototype tests—only rarely arriving before sunset. The Northlands, however, were a very close-knit family, so the earl’s return from work was typically a very welcome time of the day.

But on this day, Amy was summoned to his study instead of the living room. When she arrived, she saw her parents standing before her—her father frowning, her mother looking puzzled. Amy fidgeted uncomfortably in this unusually solemn atmosphere and felt overcome with a terrible premonition.

The earl's gloomy silence persisted until he began to speak after several pressing looks from his wife.

The earl told her he had received an announcement that Amy was selected as a candidate to become the Third Prince's fiancée.

"The Third Prince's two older brothers have already been betrothed to noblewomen from neighboring kingdoms," he continued. "So it appears that, to restore the balance of political power in the royal family, the Third Prince must marry someone a little more...local."

"But, my dear...Amy is only ten years old," her mother interjected.

"I expressed that concern as well. But she falls within the age range they set forth, and they wouldn't budge an inch... There wasn't anything I could do."

The Third Prince was thirteen years old. It seemed that ladies as young as eight to as old as eighteen years of age had been allowed to qualify as a candidate to become the prince's future bride, and that even the daughter of a marquess had joined their ranks.

"The royal palace is planning a tea party as we speak so the prince can meet the candidates in person," the earl reluctantly explained as he unveiled a portrait of Amy's potential suitor, Edward Leo Luducia, the Third Prince of Luducia.

Amy gazed upon Prince Edward's dark-blond hair and bright silvery-gray eyes.

At thirteen, the prince still had a soft youthfulness lingering in his facial features, but their elegance and symmetry were clear evidence of the handsome man he would one day become.

The face was oddly familiar to Amy... But where had she seen it before...? And when?

Amy's attention was entirely drawn to the picture—her father's voice seemed to gradually become distant.

As Amy had not formally debuted in society yet, she had few friends, and everyone she *had* met were acquaintances of the family. Her older brother had sometimes brought over friends from school—ones he had bonded with over a

shared passion for hunting magical beasts—but they had all been rather friendly and unpretentious. She never remembered any of them looking quite so intimidating...or so royal.

The Third Prince had not officially debuted yet either, so Amy couldn't have seen his portrait before in the society pages.

Plus, Amy thought, it's not like there are any paparazzi here, so it's not as if I've seen any invasive, candid photos of him floating around—

Wait... What's a "paparazzi"?

"Amy?!"

As if Amy had been struck by lightning, a bright white light filled her vision, and she fainted on the spot.



WHEN Amy came to, she remembered...

She remembered her previous life.

Her life as an ordinary high school girl in Japan.

Never in a million years had Amy ever expected she'd be reincarnated! What was she, some sort of heroine in a light novel?!

Chapter 1: Piecing Together Reality

OH my god!

“I’ve been reincarnated...into an otome game?!” Amy wondered aloud.

She had awoken lying on the canopy bed in her room. She covered her face with both hands.

Her previous life had come back to her.

When Amy had entered high school, she’d finally been allowed to get a smartphone, and she wasted no time downloading a few games onto it. Amy—or the version of herself in that life, at least—enjoyed unwinding by playing the ones where you had to stack and clear colorful little jelly-like spheres, or farming simulator games.

She downloaded just one dating sim, which had come recommended by a friend, and she’d done it only to help her friend fill up her in-game friend slots. Amy didn’t have any interest in dating sims herself. She played very sporadically, only logging in during events to do the free prize raffles and send her friend gifts.

The Amy of this world couldn’t remember the game’s title, much less what it was about. But there was one thing she could remember: an image used everywhere on the app, one that was incredibly beautiful and excessively sparkly. In it was a tall figure with dark-blond hair and silver eyes, an elegant smile tinged with sorrow on his face... Yes, she could very clearly remember that, on the opening screen, surrounded by several other handsome men, there was a character that was the spitting image of what the Third Prince would look like as an adult, flashing a fleeting yet breathtaking smile.

*Oh my **god!***

Speaking of being reincarnated into the world of an otome game...

Amy’s mother in her past life had been obsessed with reading web novels,

and she had saved many stories that followed that trope to her online book log. They had read a few together, and there were a few standard clichés that cropped up.

The main character of the story was usually reincarnated as either the heroine of the game or the heroine's rival, but it had become much more popular for the main character to be reborn as the rival, also called the "villainess."

If the main character followed the progression of the game as the villainess, typically the "bad ending" awaited her. She would be convicted of harming the game's heroine in some way and would then face banishment from the kingdom, the dissolution of her family, or—in the worst-case scenario—execution. This trope had become so popular, in fact, that the "villainess's journey" had become established as a genre of its own, where the villainess struggles alone to avoid this fate.

I guess I wouldn't mind being a background character, like the heroine's random Friend A or something, Amy pondered. But I'd hate being a main character or having dialogue! I can't stand doing things in front of people...

The thought flitted across her mind, but it sounded like something she'd think in her previous life. Although her manner of speaking was different now, it seemed her shy nature was just as strong as it had been then.

She had gotten through the game's tutorial but hadn't played the storyline. She had been able to choose the heroine's hair color and length, so Amy didn't know how it changed the main story.

But she didn't even know what the main story was in the first place! A bad feeling started to well up in her chest.

"Could I be...? No... That's not possible..."

She slowly got up and took the handheld mirror from her bedside table. Her reflection stared back.

She had shiny, straight black hair flowing down to the middle of her back. Her large round eyes were bright gold, almost like a cat's. Her lips were full and pink, her skin as white and smooth as a porcelain doll. With slightly angular facial features, she was more pretty than cute.

“I’m doomed with a face like this...”



It wasn't that she didn't like her looks. The combination of her father's black hair with her mother's golden eyes really suited her. But there was just no way this was the face of a background character, not even if it had been crafted by an overly zealous designer with a particular fondness for supporting characters.

It was too dazzling.

She suddenly recalled her father's words from before: she was a candidate to become the Third Prince's fiancée. That position would be reserved for neither the heroine nor a background character, but the *villainess*.

There was no other explanation.

Oh my god!

Amy's vision started to turn black. She was about to faint for the second time that evening in her own bed.

She didn't want this at all.

The web novels were filled with the same chain of events: the villainess would be forcibly betrothed to a man she didn't even like, her engagement would later be called off when her fiancé would get stolen away by the floozie heroine, and then the villainess would face her judgment and her family would get broken up.

Amy couldn't think of a future worse than that.

Her parents were happily married in a love marriage—a rare thing for nobility—and her father was doing well at his job developing magical tools.

Amy's brother was a bit older than her. Although he was a little too hyperactive, they had always had a good relationship. He was currently living in one of the school dormitories, but he would regularly visit home on his days off, and—

Amy suddenly remembered something else.

Another stereotype in the “otome game reincarnation” genre was having a character's brother be a love interest for the heroine. Amy combed through her memories, trying to remember if anyone in that dating sim resembled her older brother.

There were definitely five characters that would pop up on the opening screen, Amy thought, frantically racking her brain despite a slight headache to remember the beautiful opening illustration.

One was a slightly mysterious princely man (the one under suspicion of being the Third Prince).

One was a self-confident, well-to-do aristocrat (likely the son of a duke or marquess).

One was wearing magician's robes (probably someone involved with the Institute of Magic).

One was a handsome man in armor (maybe the son of the commander of the Order of Knights or something).

And then there was a younger-looking boy, the only one among them wearing foreign clothing. He was probably the prince of some neighboring country. She remembered him wearing a headscarf, and Amy assumed he had something to do with an allied kingdom to the south.

"Oh, thank goodness! There wasn't anyone that looked like my broth—"

There was, Amy realized midsentence.

He was a secret character who appeared in the events her friend labored away at. Although he wasn't featured in the main story, he always showed up during events and prize draws...and he was a dead ringer for Amy's slightly wild-looking older brother.

Amy's friend had told her that the hidden character was a playboy adventurer with a scar next to one of his slightly droopy eyes...

"Oh my...! That's what he'll become! If he keeps delving into dungeons and other places with magical beasts all the time, he'll look like that one day!"

She cut herself off with a hand over her mouth, even though she had only been speaking to herself.

Her brother was incredibly personable, and from a young age, he had been fond of mingling with all of society, men and women alike. Now at sixteen, he was without a fiancée, but he certainly had no shortage of lovers. Which meant

it was almost certain that her brother was one of the love interests of this story...

As more and more red flags were raised signaling that she was the villainess of this world, Amy felt the sudden urge to bite down on her handkerchief in helpless frustration.

This can't be happening! Has everything this whole time been part of the game?!

It had been ten years since Amy was born into this life, but...so much had happened in that time. Everything she had experienced, everyone she had met...had it all really just been scripted for the game?

As confusion raged inside her, a feeling between grief and resignation wrapped its tendrils around her. Amy felt paralyzed, and before she knew it, tears were spilling down her cheeks.

"Amy, are you awake? How are you feeling, dear?"

Amy sniffled. "M-Mom..."

After a quiet, polite knock, Amy's mother, Isabelle, quietly entered the room, looking concerned. Her frown deepened when she saw her beloved daughter's tearstained cheeks, and she sat on the bed beside her.

Amy slumped over, yielding to the slant from the weight on the bedsprings, and hugged her mother tightly.

My mother...her warmth...is this also just part of the game?

The suspicion that everything in her past had all been fabricated was already solidifying into a conviction, and an indescribable emptiness began to fill her chest.

Amy barely managed to get out, "I...I feel..."

"Oh, dear, no need to be so down in the dumps about it! Do you feel ill? Does your head hurt?"

Amy continued to sniffle. "N-No, it's... I remember. That video game. Th-That..."

She stopped herself. Even if she had said “otome game,” those words would be incomprehensible in this world she now lived in. She may have been only ten years old, but she knew a little bit about the world. As the daughter of a nobleman, she had been receiving a private education for several years now, so she should have realized this sooner and caught herself from speaking nonsense.

But she had just remembered the memories of her past life, and her jumbled-up brain was not thinking rationally.

As Amy tried to smooth over her “video game” slip of the tongue, her mother simply rubbed her back tenderly. But then Isabelle said something Amy could never have expected.

“My, my... So you’ve remembered, too.”

Amy froze.

“...What?”

When Amy looked up in amazement, her mother’s eyes—the same shade of gold as her own—were twinkling as she smiled.

“It was quite a shock, wasn’t it? I mean, the whole family reincarnating together...”

“Wait, what?!” repeated Amy.

Isabelle chuckled. “But despite the changes, we’re all pretty much the same, you know. So there’s no need to get so worked up!”

“M-Mom...?”

Isabelle seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself, bulldozing right past her daughter’s disorientation straight into wondering if she should whip up a celebratory dish, like Japanese red rice or something, to commemorate everyone in the family remembering their past lives.

An ill-timed doubt came to Amy’s mind that Japanese red rice probably didn’t exist in this world, but then she remembered...that was just the type of person her mom was. Slightly off-kilter, happy-go-lucky, marching to the beat of her own drum, stubborn at times...

Memories of Amy's previous life flooded her mind, mixing and marbling with memories of her current life. Then her brain finally caught up with what she had been told.

When her mom said the whole family had reincarnated together, did she mean...*everyone*?

H-Hold on—let's circle back to that!

"W-Wait a minute... When you say 'everyone,' do you mean Dad, too?"

"Of course! He's still tinkering with those machines of his, isn't he?"

In Amy's previous life, her father had worked as an engineer for a manufacturer of household electrical appliances. In this life, he was absolutely obsessed with developing magical tools. It wasn't quite household appliances, but close enough...

Yeah, Amy thought, that makes sense.

"Wh-What about my brother?"

"Oh, Harold? That boy... The moment he remembered his past life, he shouted, 'I'm gonna hunt things for real now!' For Pete's sake..."

In his previous incarnation, her brother had loved action video games, especially the hunter characters who specialized in the dual-wielding fighting style. When she compared that boy with Harold, who had at some point randomly become motivated in his magic and swordsmanship lessons, Amy thought, *Yeah...that checks out.*

Isabelle, with a slightly faraway look, was twisting her hand like she was barbecuing a big skewer and muttered, "That meat might be difficult to cook properly..."

Amy had heard that Harold did well at school, but the motivation behind his success definitely boiled down to wanting to enjoy his life in this world hunting monsters. She was willing to bet that whatever he hunted would be served as the main course for dinner tonight.

"Mom...you and I...we all really reincarnated together..."

Isabelle laughed. "We *are* a close-knit family!"

Although Amy wondered whether that really had anything to do with it, given the circumstances, it was warmly reassuring.

The way the earl and countess raised their children was certainly one aspect of their lives that was very unaristocratic—they were quite particular about being hands-on with raising them, instead of just leaving everything to a wet nurse. The sort of things Amy didn't fully appreciate as a child, she now absolutely understood.

“Mom...”

When Amy clung to her mother, Isabelle brushed aside her bangs and stroked her cheeks. The warmth of her hand was the same as it was in their past lives.

The family together again... Maybe this reincarnation isn't so bad after all, Amy thought, her mind finally at ease.



BUT wait...! *I think we're living in the world of an otome game, and I'm the game's villainess!*

Amy communicated these suspicions she had to her mother in precisely those terms. If she was truly the same mother who would read web novels with Amy in their previous lives, she would understand exactly what that meant.

Isabelle, who nodded along and listened attentively, put a finger to her lips and tilted her head slightly.

“Reincarnated into an otome game... There used to be so many stories that followed that trope in our old lives, weren't there?” she mused. “So, Amy... What do you want to do?”

Amy started. “What do you mean?”

She didn't want to be forced into a marriage, but she also didn't want to selfishly call off the arrangement. She hated the idea of breaking up her family most of all.

Amy felt a little annoyed, wondering what her mother was trying to get at with her question.

“You're worried because the Third Prince and your brother resemble some of

the characters in that game you used to play, right?” her mother continued. “But you know what? Everything’s going to be okay. Because even if the setting of that game did exist, *this* place is our reality.”

“But it just feels like there’s some sort of mysterious force in this world making things happen to me.”

That much was true. Stories from the otome game genre often followed the pattern where an “invisible hand of the game” would drag the protagonist back into the plot in a never-ending cycle, no matter how hard she tried to avoid problems or sticky situations.

“There’s no force like that controlling things, dear.”

“There’s not?”

“Of course not! And if your mama tells you there’s no such thing, you’d best believe there’s no such thing!”

Her mother’s fearless smile followed this assertion. At this, Amy’s memories immediately became crystal clear. Whenever her mother made that face—whether in this world or the last—Amy knew she was drawing her line in the sand. Any pushback would be pointless.

“Kay... If you say so.”

Her mother chuckled. “I’ll give you another chance to rephrase that.”

“I-I mean... Of course, Mother!”

Isabelle poked at Amy’s cheek, slightly taut from grinning, with a finger, and they both broke out laughing. Odd as it may seem, being silly with her mother like this helped calm Amy’s nerves.

Isabelle placed her hand on Amy’s cheek once more, looked into her eyes, and went on. “I’ll ask you again, okay? Just set aside all your worries about game worlds and mysterious forces for the moment. What do you want to do *now*, Amy?”

“Now...?”

“Your brother has been thoroughly enjoying his new life as a hunter, and your father and I are enjoying things here, too. We’ve been given such a precious

second chance... Is there something you'd like to do?"

One thing did pop into Amy's mind...but she wondered if she'd bother even asking. If she had brought it up in her life before, it would have been met with an immediate rejection, but maybe now...

With Isabelle's excited, expectant expression urging her on, Amy opened her mouth.

"I...want a cat."

"I just knew you'd say that!" cried Isabelle, clapping her hands together like she got the right answer on a pop quiz.

Amy had always loved animals, even in her previous life. She had longed to have a cat or dog, but because both she and her father were prone to allergies, she gave it up as an impossible dream.

Those days when all she could do was wistfully sigh while watching animal videos on the internet or television never did completely scratch the itch.

"You know, all those trees that used to give us seasonal allergies don't exist in this world. I've never even heard anyone mention seasonal allergies at all! Plus, Dad hasn't had any allergy attacks since being reincarnated, has he?" Amy asked.

"That's right. I think a cat sounds like a great plan!"

The Northland family did not keep many servants, but—in accordance with the earl's wishes—they kept enough staff to ensure that the house was at least kept thoroughly clean. The earl's preference for a perpetually dust-free environment was perhaps influenced by those memories of his past life where his immune system would overreact to household dust.

Before, Amy used to wonder a little about his clean-freak nature, but now that she had remembered how things used to be with his allergies, it made much more sense.

"I want a cat, a bird, and a dog! A ferret or a rabbit would be pretty nice, too!"

"I just knew this day would come! That's why we haven't had any animals before now."

Hearing that her mother was planning on letting her choose her own pet made Amy smile from ear to ear.

Even in this world, she had always wanted a pet. But for some reason, she never felt like she could bring it up with her parents... Maybe she had been subconsciously influenced by those memories of her previous life that she hadn't yet remembered.

"Let's start looking for one right away! You'd prefer to adopt an abandoned cat or dog rather than buy one, right?"

Amy nodded. Of course her mother would remember tiny details like that! She threw her arms around her mother in a hug and gave her a teary, appreciative look.

"Oh!" Amy jumped. The portrait of the Third Prince made her remember her previous train of thought. "I guess I still don't know what to do about *that* problem. I really don't want to marry him..."

Even if this wasn't the world of her otome game, as long as that image of his potential doppelgänger was seared in her memory, Amy would be frightened of the Third Prince. She would unconsciously dread going near him.

"My dear, there's a simple solution for that. There are other potential candidates, so all he has to do is choose someone else!"

"Don't you think that's a little optimistic?"

Although Amy's facial features were rather angular, she was objectively beautiful. And not only did she come from a magical background, but she was also related on her mother's side to a feudal lord of one of the kingdom's coastal border provinces who enjoyed a strong influence over the mariners there.

The Third Prince's other candidates included the daughter of a certain marquess whose family members were constantly at odds with each other over family succession, and a certain eight-year-old countess who had an exceptional reputation for being a spoiled brat. With competition like that, it wouldn't take a genius to determine via process of elimination who was likely to be the Third Prince's final choice.

But even so, Isabelle seemed so full of confidence as she claimed there wouldn't be any problem getting Amy out of the engagement...

"...Oh! Could the Third Prince be g—"

Amy was able to stop herself from saying the last word—*gay*—but her inappropriate thoughts must have leaked from her ears. Isabelle admonished her with a playful noogie.

"Amy! You can't go around shipping the Third Prince with other guys like he's some manga character! What am I going to do with you?"

"O-Ouch, Mom! *Okay!* Sorry!"

As Isabelle let her go, she slipped off the bed and stood right in front of Amy, her eyes sparkling with conviction. Amy stared back, eagerly awaiting whatever solution her mother would offer. The countess straightened her back, hands on her hips, and suddenly said:

"You need to eat."

There was a slight pause.

"...What?" Amy finally asked.

"We need to fatten you up!" Isabelle replied, puffing out her chest.

Amy felt rather dizzy.

What on earth was she talking about?

"Even if you get chubby, Amy, you'll always be my darling little girl. So don't you worry about a thing! Just keep on eating until you're so large that you're positively bursting out of your dresses!"

"Wait—*what?!?*"

It wasn't as though beauty standards were wildly different in this world from the previous one... People did have individual tastes, of course, but a slimmer figure was generally seen as more attractive than a bigger one.

Amy was nearing the end of girlhood and was at this point blossoming into a young lady of unmistakable beauty. And now that she had regained the memories of her past life, her mental age was like that of a teenager—and one

who was very fashion conscious, at that.

Amy puzzled silently over why she needed to get fat on purpose, but Isabelle's smile only widened.

"I'll let you in on a secret, Amy. According to a little birdie in my private intelligence network, every single member of the royal family prefers women with *slender* figures!"

...Oh!

Attractiveness, which could be surprisingly effective at influencing diplomatic matters, must have been a requirement to marry into the royal family. When Amy stopped to think about it, there wasn't one woman in the entire royal family who wasn't beautiful, slender, and tall.

Maybe putting on weight isn't such a bad idea after all...

Amy was waveringly leaning toward agreeing to the plan, but Isabelle sealed the deal with a finishing blow.

"Plus, you don't even like boys all that much, right? I think the best thing for you would be to find a kind husband who doesn't put much stock in outward beauty and have him fall in love with the chubby version of you!"

Amy was temporarily stunned, mouth open.

True enough, in Amy's past life, she made no secret of disliking boys her own age, so much so that she chose to go to an all-girls' school.

If she gained weight in a gradual, healthy way and then married someone who valued her personality over her looks, they could get a bunch of pets together, and—

"...That would be perfect! Mom, what a genius idea!"

The mother-daughter duo high-fived and started their plan immediately. From that night's dinner onward, there was an increase in the number of courses served to the Earl of Northland's daughter.



THE truth was, not much changed in Amy's home life since she remembered

her previous life. The past and present blended together so seamlessly that when the family would reminisce about the past when they were alone, sometimes their old-life mannerisms would slip out.

But Amy was born in this world, and her ten years of lived experience had permeated into every nook and cranny of her being. Even if she tried to change back into the exact person she was before, it would be impossible. The past was, after all, the past. It didn't hold a candle against the present.

Amy was quite relieved that although her previous life was a part of her, it wasn't so strong that it blotted out or completely overwrote the person she was now. Even if it had just been ten years, she had been worried she might not even know where she stood if everything she had ever known was replaced by her previous life.

Her parents and brother had told her they had gone down that same road and worked through those same feelings. Amy certainly felt lucky that they'd all reincarnated together. With so many family members with so much experience close by to guide her, she didn't suffer too much confusion and disorientation other than the initial shock, and she had been able to rather easily reconcile her past with her present.

Although her mental age had increased, her basic nature of being outgoing at home but timid in public hadn't changed, so she didn't exhibit any outwardly perceivable changes. Her tastes in dresses and accessories did become a little less childish, but the servants did not seem to be particularly concerned about this, with one whispering, "It may be a little early, but she is getting to be around that age..."

And then there was Amy's wish to have a pet...

"What?! Learn healing magic? Me?"

"Yes," her father replied. "We can't jump the gun and assume you won't develop allergies in this life. If there's a way to prevent them, then of course we should do that, but if an allergy attack *does* happen, then you must know how to treat it."

Amy's father had told her that she had to first learn magic if she wanted to have a pet. His argument was that if Amy could perform healing magic, she

could deal with allergy symptoms on her own. Not only that, but if she learned purification and protective magic, she might be able to eliminate allergens and prevent any allergy attacks altogether.

“That makes sense... But couldn’t you just make a magical tool that could treat allergies?”

“I specialized in machines, so I’m not too familiar with the medical field. And in any case, the very idea of ‘allergies’ hasn’t even been discovered in this world yet.”

Luducia’s conflicts with its neighboring kingdoms had recently cooled off, so there had been little need of late for rapidly developed, weaponized magical tools. As a result, the total budget allocated for the development of magical tools was only getting smaller and smaller.

“I mean, peace is a good thing, but still...,” the Earl of Northland complained lightheartedly to his wife and daughter. “I understand why the budget favors the Order of Knights and the Order of Magicians over tools. They’re easy to parade around to deter any attacks, and training the right people takes time and effort. We just don’t have the funds right now to research magical tools that combat completely unknown things like allergies. There’s hardly enough money for our department to keep the lights on.”

“They’re being pretty tightfisted, huh...,” her mother quipped to her father, who smirked back.

“Well...I guess it’s better than wasting money,” Amy piped up, not sure what else to say. “But I understand why you’ve given me a condition to meet,” she continued. “I’ll work harder at studying magic. Then I can get a cat, right?”

“Yes. Achieve an overall mastery of healing magic first, and then you may get one pet to start out with. And how I’ll judge if you’ve truly learned healing is... Ah, that’s it! I’ll ask Hal.”

“Harold?!”

“That’s right! He gets hurt all the time exploring dungeons, so I’m sure he’s familiar with what correct healing magic feels like.”

Students had to be in a group before they were allowed to enter forests,

dungeons, or other places where magical beasts lived, and at least one of the group members had to know how to use healing magic.

Amy's older brother, Harold, had never received any serious, life-threatening injuries, but cuts, scratches, and bruises were commonplace during his adventures. He was patched up every time, so he would definitely be the one in the family most used to receiving healing magic.

The following week, when Harold was visiting home from school, Amy let him in on their plan. He laughed and agreed.

"Sounds great! When the time comes and you feel ready, I'll skip the healing after a hunt and swing home, then."

"But let someone heal you there if you get really badly hurt! Then when you get home, maybe you can try getting hurt again. Like you could fall down a few stairs, or open a letter aggressively and cut your hand with the letter opener..."

"That's not exactly easy to do, you know!"

"You can do it, Harold!" cheered his mother, completely untroubled, from the sidelines. The corners of Harold's mouth twitched at the absurdity of it all.

Amy also let Harold know about her "otome game" theory, but he didn't have much in the way of a reaction. He never did have any interest in video games made for girls.

Be that as it may, Amy thought about how much trouble would come if he were to follow the game's trajectory as a result of being made aware of it, so she reconsidered how much she'd tell him.

"You know, on one of the game's screens, there was a character that looked a lot like you, except he had a scar just *there*," she said, tracing her finger over the outer tip of his eyebrow, right next to the corner of his right eye, to just above his cheekbone.

The scar left behind, just a thin echo of a line, contributed a lot to the character's "adventurer" and "wild playboy" aura.

But Amy suddenly became very worried... If Hal actually did get an injury by his eye like that, he would be at a very real risk of going blind in that eye!

“A scar, huh?” Harold said. “I do sometimes get injuries on my face, but none deep enough yet to leave a scar. If healing magic is applied soon after, it gets all fixed up, you see. They must have left that scar there on purpose, for sure.”

“But why?”

“Hmm... ’Cause it’d look kinda sexy? Girls would like it? Stuff like that.”

“Spoken just like a pubescent boy...” Isabelle sighed. “Can’t you imagine how sad you would make me if you scarred up your face for a stupid reason like that?”

“I’m not gonna do it! I have a girlfriend, you know.”

Harold surprised his mother once again when the girlfriend in question was different from the one they’d heard about before.

The Northland family never stipulated that their children’s marriages had to be political. They essentially encouraged their children to love whoever they wanted, and it was their parents’ long-standing policy that their children would not be forced into an engagement before they turned eighteen.

This attitude was why Harold was allowed to date around so casually (so long as he could accept personal responsibility for the consequences), and why the conversation in her father’s study about the Third Prince’s engagement was such an unusual occurrence for the Northlands.

“I’m not two-timing these girls or anything!” Harold interjected. “But every single time I get told, ‘Sorry, this just isn’t working out.’ It’s not like I’m doing anything wrong.”

“Aren’t you constantly out hunting monsters, though?” Amy asked reasonably. “Can’t you see how they’d get fed up with that and just end up calling it quits?”

“H-Hunting monsters is fun!” Harold said, flustered. “Obviously I’d do it as much as I can!”

“...Harold,” came a threatening voice.

As Harold cowed under his mother’s glare, Amy almost felt like she had been transported to her previous life and her brother was getting scolded for staying

up too late playing video games and neglecting his homework.

If something Amy had loved that much had become possible to do in real life, she probably would've gotten obsessive about it, too.

Not to mention, he had worked quite hard to make his name known as a real adventurer. With the results of all these efforts on the cusp of coming to fruition, Amy could understand where he was coming from.

"I tell these girls that the biggest loves in my life are my two swords, but they still go on about how lonely they are when I'm in dungeons and how I need to spend more time with them... I just can't win. What am I supposed to do?"

"I bet even on dates you talk to them about the best way to loot monsters, don't you?" Amy said, smiling.

"What's wrong with that? Girls like jewels, don't they?! They should have fun talking about stuff they enjoy!"

It was certainly possible to get jewels from the corpses of magical beasts. But Amy seriously doubted whether there was a single girl alive who would rejoice at hearing a detailed play-by-play of the gory scene of Harold chopping up the monster's body to retrieve them.

Isabelle laughed. "Well, Harold! It sounds like we need to have a little chat about how to build interpersonal relationships."

"M-Mom!" he groaned.

The Northland house had always been full of pleasant conversation, even before Amy had remembered her previous life. But now they were even more unreserved, like some invisible barrier between them had been torn down. Amy was happy—it was more fun this way.

Speaking on behalf of his long line of ex-girlfriends, Isabelle gave Harold sharp but honest advice as he kneeled in repentance on the floor. When all was said and done, he looked very happy to go back to school.



AFTER that, Amy began to totally immerse herself in her magic studies.

It wasn't as if she hated studying magic before, but now the possibility of her

getting a cat hinged upon it. If she couldn't get serious about it for a cat, nothing could ever make her get serious!

With her extraordinary concentration, Amy had improved so much in only half a month that her governess was amazed at her progress, but then Amy faced a sudden, unexpected plateau. No matter how hard she tried, it only seemed to make her hungry, and that took precedence over her vital magic studies.

Due to the high magical aptitude of her mother's side of the family, Amy was born with naturally superior magical powers. However, she had a low total supply of magic, and her casting lacked stability. These aspects were largely influenced by the practitioner's age, so there was a limit to how much she could improve by practice and experience alone. Her ten-year-old body was still growing, after all. The only thing she could do was wait, but time was not passing quickly enough for Amy's liking.

The longer she waited and futilely practiced, the further out of reach her dream of a cat seemed to get. Amy became very depressed over this, but a solution came along from a rather unexpected place.

Although her magical training had stagnated, her other plan—eating more and putting on weight—was progressing quite well. The Northland family's chef was very skilled, and the special menu ordered by the countess helped Amy's body grow at a steady, healthy rate.

Her weight increased in all areas of her body, and the change was substantial enough that even she could notice the difference. Her appearance used to be so refined that people would assume she was a cold and unfriendly person. But now, every time she looked in a mirror, she noticed her rounded cheeks gave off a warm, friendly feeling. The weight gain only increased her charm.

Then, around the time the seamstress was called because her dresses had become too tight, Amy started to feel a change in the flow of her magical powers.

As her weight increased, her magical development stabilized just as much.

The magic power she emitted used to trickle out like from a toddler's plastic watering can, but it had now transformed into a large, industrial-strength hose.

For whatever reason, whenever I gain weight, my magic becomes more stable! Amy realized. *Maybe because magical powers are tied to the individual person, it has some sort of inseparable relationship with the physical body containing it, like the relationship between an opera singer's figure and their vocal power.*

Which meant that if she ate more, she could increase both her weight *and* her magical powers.

After coming to this realization, Amy had one more plate of food added to her mealtimes.

Chapter 2: A Fateful Encounter

ONE day—a little over two months since the evening Amy fainted and remembered her previous life—she and her mother Isabelle, the Countess of Northland, paid a visit to the Duke of Coverdale’s estate.

Nobles generally engaged in philanthropic activities in response to some public need. Many of these activities were passed down in the family from generation to generation, but there were also many who devoted themselves to causes they had a particular interest in.

One such noble was the king’s younger sister, though through marriage she was now the wife of the Duke of Coverdale. The duchess’s unrivaled love of cats was common knowledge in high society circles. She tried to educate others about the issue of animal breeding all while taking care of stray and abandoned cats herself.

It was also commonly known that the duchess would throw her doors wide open to like-minded cat lovers. As soon as Isabelle had told her that Amy wanted to adopt a cat, they were both warmly invited to her home.

The duchess showed them to the room that acted as her cat sanctuary, where the cats could spend their time however they wished.

“Wow...!” Amy exclaimed, eyes sparkling with wonder as the room came into view.

This is absolutely amazing! It’s just perfect!

Atop the floor blanketed in low-pile carpet was a huge wooden tower where the cats could climb and play. There was a gently swaying hammock that dipped in places where several cats had curled up. Little cat houses of woven wicker were set up throughout the room. Every inch of the room looked incredibly comfortable.

There wasn’t a trace of animal odor or hair anywhere due to the purification

magic cast inside the space. Amy had heard that the duchess employed a magician full-time, so the cleanliness of the room didn't come as much of a surprise. At the same time, Amy became even more determined to work harder at learning magic.

Amy could see snippets of soft backs and relaxed tails peeking out between the seating cushions placed throughout the room, making her feel as though she had just walked into a cat café.

Despite it being her first time meeting the duchess, and Amy herself being far below the duchess in rank, Amy found it very hard to rein in her ever-building excitement as she was shown into the room.

All the cats were rescues, but there were so many different types and colorings that Amy felt her attention pulled in a hundred different directions at once. Her heart ached when she heard that one of them had been abandoned in a park so young that its umbilical cord had still been attached. No one knew if something had happened to its mother or if a person had abandoned it on purpose.

It was impossible to protect every single abandoned cat in the world. But even so, Amy truly believed that helping cats, as much as one's means allowed, was important.

A satisfied smile spread between the duchess's plump cheeks as she watched Amy gazing at the cats in wonder. The duchess had always said that girls these days were too skinny. She had so warmly welcomed Amy to her home for that reason alone. Perhaps she had felt a sense of camaraderie.

"So," the duchess said to Amy gently, "I've heard you've been studying my book on how to take care of cats. But of course, a good match has a lot to do with personality and compatibility... Which kind of cat would you prefer, then?"

"Hm... That's kind of hard to say. They're all just so cute." Amy covered her cheeks with her hands and sighed.

There was a brown striped cat that had only one ear folded down. There was an elegant blue-gray cat with slightly stumpy legs. There was a cat with white only on its feet, like it was wearing socks. There was a cat with a slightly bent tail. They were all adorable!

There was also a slightly chubby cat who for quite some time had been leaping at the curtains and then falling over, and one who had been eating treats on the other side of the room with a mustache-like pattern on its face. They were each so uniquely charming it was like comparing apples to oranges!

That's why, if I can only choose one...

"I think I'd rather have the cat choose me."

If a cat came to live with Amy, they would have to leave the place they'd come to know and love and leave their cat friends behind. Amy at least wanted them to decide for themselves whether they wanted to come home with her.

"I just don't think it's fair if I'm the only one happy with the choice."

The duchess beamed when she heard this.

"That's exactly right! Very wise, Amy. There are many adults who don't even understand that."

Perhaps there were some things only cat lovers understood.

The three of them walked right past the sofa and instead sat on the floor cushions, letting the cats crawl on their laps. They continued discussing cats like that for a while, eventually agreeing that Amy should go along and meet all the cats a few times to try to find a compatible one.

But at that moment, Amy looked past the duchess and noticed a cat coming out from behind a stack of cushions in the corner of the room.

After looking at Amy appraisingly, the cat suddenly turned its face toward the window.

"Ah!" Amy gasped quietly, surprised.

"Oh, yes," said the duchess, turning around and cheerfully introducing the new face. "He's been with me here the longest."

His fur was black and had orangey-brown stripes. Tufts of long hair sprouted out of his slightly large ears, which were pointed like perfect triangles. Amy could tell the long, thick fur on his body was incredibly soft, even from where she was sitting. His tail, which was probably the same length as his torso, was long, thick, and bushy. What surprised her most, however, was the sheer size of

him.

“He’s enormous...”

“He’s an adult, so he won’t get any bigger than this.”

He was so huge, he looked more like a miniature tiger than a housecat. Even if Amy did try to lift him in her arms, his hind legs would probably still drag on the floor. That is...if she would be able to lift him at all.

Isabelle quietly drew closer to Amy and whispered in her ear, “It looks like a breed even bigger than a Maine Coon!” Amy thought so, too.

In her previous life, Amy had always wanted a huge long-haired Maine Coon. She never dreamed she’d meet the spitting image of her dream cat in this life!

“Come here, Tigger,” called the duchess.

Although the cat’s ears twitched, his gaze was resolutely fixed on the window. Only when it seemed as though enough awkward silence had passed did the cat finally turn to face the group.

An excess of hair around his neck made his body look even bigger. His defined mouth had such a lovely curve, almost as if he had popped out of a painting.

And Tigger’s eyes were the exact same shade of gold as Amy’s.

When the duchess called again, he started walking slowly toward them. The soft *tmp tmp* sounds of his wide, graceful feet against the ground were almost too cute for Amy to handle.

Amy could sympathize with the cat as he took a slight detour and seemed to be calculating the distance between them. They were strangers in Tigger’s room—of course he would be wary.

You’re pretty sharp, Tigger.

Amy suspected he had been observing the group even before he had appeared in front of them, ever since they had entered the room.

“Tigger’s five years old, a male, of course,” the duchess continued. “He’s quite big, but he’s just a pampered boy and a little shy of strangers.”

“Really?” asked Isabelle. “What was his life like before he came here?”

Tigger had finally made his way over to them. As the duchess petted him, she grinned slightly, reminiscing to herself.

“An acquaintance of mine had raised Tigger since he was a kitten, but they passed away very unexpectedly. With no one who would claim him, he came here, but he just hasn’t been able to meet the right owner. He’s been here for two years now.”

Amy had heard that it typically took fostered cats six months at the longest to find a new owner. Two years was quite long.

“But he’s so wonderful...,” Amy lamented.

“You think so? It’s just his size, you see. People can’t seem to help getting so shocked and put off by it.”

Amy was not exactly tall. Tigger would probably be taller than her if you included the length of his tail. But she wasn’t scared by this. Instead, she rather enjoyed imagining what it would be like to hug him and be blanketed by the soft creature.

As the duchess continued to pet him, he let out a small chirp of pleasure.

The brief, high-pitched, sweet sound resembled the chime of a bell and was wildly out of place with his large frame. Amy thought her ears might melt with happiness.

“He sounds so cute...!” she cooed.

“Would you like to pet him?”

“Are you sure?”

The duchess smiled and beckoned her over.

“Come here by us, slowly and quietly.”

Amy approached and sat down silently in front of him but slightly off to the side to avoid spooking him. She simply sat there wordlessly until Tigger, contentedly being stroked by the duchess, finally took notice of Amy and turned toward her.

He’s such a beautiful kitty...and those eyes...!

Up close, Tigger's beauty became even more apparent. His fluffy fur was totally soft everywhere, like cotton candy.

As Amy stared with pink cheeks, Tigger looked directly at her.

Amy felt like she might be sucked into his golden eyes.

"This girl is my guest today," the duchess explained to the cat. "Won't you let her be your friend?"

"Hello, Tigger! My name is Amy."

Amy put out her hand to Tigger without touching him, asking wordlessly if it would be all right for her to pet him.

After making sure he didn't hate the idea, she gently extended her hand and petted him between his ears and around his forehead. She readjusted so she could run her hand down his body a few times.

"My—it looks like he's okay with it!" said the duchess happily. "That doesn't happen often!"

"Your fur is so smooth, Tigger. You've got such a beautiful coat, you know? It's so lovely."



Although the duchess was a little surprised that such a shy cat was meekly letting Amy pet him, she was delighted to hear Tigger being spoken of so well. Tigger did not seem entirely displeased either, his golden eyes squinting contentedly.

His fur was as smooth and soft as silk. Running her hands through his thick hair, Amy couldn't keep herself from smiling. Spellbound, she moved her hand underneath his chin. The inner part of the fur around his neck grew even shorter and denser. His fur was also malleable, so even though her hand could easily sink into it up to her wrist, the fingertips of Amy's small hands couldn't even reach the skin underneath.

Amy wondered if he had gotten used to being touched by her, or if it just felt nice being petted. Tigger placed his front paws on Amy's lap to rub up against her.

"Oh my goodness, he's so fluffy and cute...!" she muttered.

"This is wonderful, Amy! He's never even been that attached to *me*!"

Never before had Tigger fawned over someone so obviously. This time the duchess was genuinely astonished, but Amy didn't have the wherewithal to respond.

Unable to refuse the sweet *meow* Tigger chirruped in his high-pitched voice, Amy started petting him with both hands. It almost looked like Tigger was petting her, too, and their closeness seemed to give off the illusion they were hugging each other.

Her study of magic had prolonged her wait to get a cat. But in fact, it was this very magic—and particularly the healing magic she had put so much effort toward—that had awakened a special type of healing magic lying dormant inside Amy.

This rare power was still weak, and because it did not affect humans, Amy herself was unaware of its existence. However, there were some highly sensitive animals that could sense it... What Tigger felt from Amy herself and from her hands was a sense of security and, above all else, a comfortable warmth.

Eventually, Amy was completely toppled over by Tigger, but she was so entranced that she didn't even try to free herself from under the bundle of soft fur until she was rescued by the panicking duchess.

There never was and would probably never again be anyone whom Tigger was so taken with. It was quickly and easily decided that Amy, who had already won the duchess's confidence, would adopt him.

There was, unfortunately, one bump in the road—having never expected to care for such a large cat, the Northlands still had some preparing to do before they could take him home.

Amy wept, and the duchess promised her that Tigger's adoption would simply be put on hold until they had finished getting their home ready for him. Amy, in turn, promised Tigger that she would visit him all the time until she could take him home, and then Amy and Isabelle took their leave of the duke's residence for the day.



ONE day, Amy was visiting the duke's estate to see Tigger.

While her mother, Isabelle, and the duchess were talking, Amy took Tigger with her to walk around the courtyard.

"Hey! You!"

From the opposite side of the hedge blossoming with white flowers appeared a boy who looked to be a little older than Amy but younger than her brother. At being called out to so unkindly, she involuntarily stepped back to hide behind Tigger.

In her past life, when she was in elementary school, Amy had been terribly bullied by a mean boy in her class. On top of that, in this life she was unaccustomed to interacting with people besides her family, so she had a tendency to be wary of boys her own age.

The boy wore well-tailored clothing and fit in with his surroundings very naturally. *He must be one of the duke's sons...*, Amy realized. From his looks, she guessed he was probably the youngest one.

His bright blond hair glittered dazzlingly in the sunlight, and he had the same blue-gray eyes as the duchess. His self-assured expression made him appear strong-willed and self-indulgent, but there was something more than that...

Wait...his face looks like...

The opening screen of that cell phone game returned to her mind. This boy's face was identical to the handsome young man who smiled arrogantly in the second spot from the left. The one Amy had assumed was some sort of aristocrat.

Oh my god! It was just as I feared!

"You're the one? I heard you were coming in the afternoon."

"Pardon? Um...I had arranged to arrive in the morning..."

The boy interrogated her rudely, but she had given her word that she would visit. She had planned to stay until around midday, which she explained to him, but he raised one of his finely shaped eyebrows like he doubted her.

To top it all off, he looked over her chubby body with judgmental eyes and let out a soft snort of laughter. She had no desire to attract this boy's attention, but it felt bad being so obviously snubbed before he even knew her name.

"I thought you were just trying to cozy up to my mother, but Tigger, too? I'm sorry to tell you that all your efforts have been in vain. Your face isn't so bad, I suppose, but... Well, you should give it up while you're ahead."

"But...I can't give up now! We're already preparing a *special* room and everything."

"What?!"

He may not have known it, but Tigger's adoption was already a sure thing. The duchess was very thorough when it came to her animals, so the proper documents had already been exchanged.

And anyway, looks and weight don't matter when you're adopting a cat!

She knew this boy was probably a love interest in the game and didn't want to have anything to do with him. But she couldn't give up Tigger, either!

As if the cat sensed how she was feeling, he looked back at her and gave a small *meow*, which seemed to say, “It’ll be okay.”

I have to come right out and tell him Tigger’s coming to live with me.

Amy barely had any experience talking to a boy one-on-one. She was so nervous her legs were shaking, but she continued her rebuttal.

“Duchess Camilla gave me permission.”

“So now you’re calling my mother by her name?”

“Yes. She said we were too close for those formalities and told me to call her that.”

“I can’t believe it... Are you serious about this, Mother?” he grumbled to himself, face-palming and rolling his eyes at the sky. “Such a chubby little...”

Tigger’s bushy tail softly swished against Amy in encouragement.

Right! Amy thought in response. *I won’t back down now!*

But maybe this boy just really likes Tigger and doesn’t want to give him away... So I’ll need to set his mind at ease and let him know that after I adopt him, I’ll take really good care of him and shower him with love and affection.

Joining her hands in front of her chest as if in prayer, Amy passionately continued. “Um—I know you probably won’t believe me, but I...I think it was love at first sight!”

“HUH?! What are you—”

“It’s the first time I’ve ever felt this way. So there’s no way I’ll give up!”

Amy rushed forward, jerking her head up to look into his eyes because of their height difference. She was so desperate to convince him that she and Tigger were meant for each other that she didn’t notice they were only inches apart.

The boy’s face turned bright red, and he started incoherently stammering nonsense.

True to her nature, Amy was so nervous that tears were threatening to spill out of her big gold eyes. But even still, she held her gaze, because her brother

had once told her, “If you look away, you lose.” Of course, he had been referring to fighting magical beasts, not arguing with aristocrats.

The boy was the first one to break his gaze.

“R...Really?”

“Yes! Even Duchess Camilla happily told me it was fate!”

“*F-Fate?!?*”

“We’ll treasure each other. We’ll always be together. We’ll sleep in the same bed, and I’ll even help out with bathing!”

“No way! *B-Bathing?!?*”

“Well, it’s still pretty new to me, so I might not be great at it, but I’ll give it my best shot! Well...it’s just...I heard you can get closer that way...”

I wonder if that’s not actually true...? Amy thought once she saw his reaction.

He was hiding the lower half of his face with his hand, but Amy could clearly see that his face had turned scarlet down to where his cravat was tied around the base of his neck.

It would make more sense for his face to turn white... Amy thought distantly.

“Y-You’re *that* smitten?!?”

“Yes...I am. I really am. I’m so in love that I often dream about it,” Amy finished with pink cheeks. She could hear several incoherent starts and stammers from behind the hand shielding the boy’s mouth.



Now he understands my feelings...doesn't he? With a little lingering uneasiness, Amy unconsciously repeated in a soft voice, "It's love... It's love..."

A small bird chirped in the courtyard, where the tension hung so thickly in the air, they could almost hear each other breathing.

"...My...my name is Alexander Gilles Coverdale. You can call me Alec."

"Alec," she repeated, breathing a sigh of relief that his voice was finally capable of speech again.

Once she addressed him as she was instructed, Alexander brushed aside his golden bangs and nodded, looking satisfied, his face still tinged with red. His haughty attitude from when they first met was completely gone, and it was as if all the malice had been drawn out from his countenance and voice.

As Amy's anxiety dissipated and she broke out into a smile, Alexander awkwardly looked away again, a blush still lingering around the corners of his eyes.

It was then that Amy finally realized that they were so close, they were practically touching. Quickly stepping back, a smile escaped her lips in a vain attempt to shield her embarrassment.

"U-Um... I'm Amy Northland," she said, gently picking up the hem of her skirt and giving a simple curtsy. "So anyway, I hope that explains why I'll be taking Tigger to live with me one day. But I'll bring him back to visit here sometimes, so I hope you won't be too—"

"What? Tigger?" asked Alec suddenly. "I thought... Wait, as in the daughter of the Earl of Northland?"

"W-Well...yes."

Alexander looked stunned—he was unable to speak.

Amy hemmed and hawed, but she didn't know how to respond to that. Suddenly, the duchess's cheery voice rang out, breaking the delicate silence that hung between them.

"Amy dear! You forgot your hat!"

“Oh, Duchess Camilla!”

Looking back, Amy saw the duchess holding her hat and heading toward them. Her mother and a few maids were also with her.

Amy quickly rushed over to meet them.

“Oh, Alec,” said the duchess. “I told you to stay in your room.”

Alec made a noncommittal noise.

“Well, that’s all right. Have you finished getting acquainted? This is Amy, daughter of Isabelle, the Countess of Northland. They’re going to be Tigger’s new family!”

“...So I’ve heard,” he grumbled aloofly.

The duchess chided Alexander with a sigh, then turned back with a smile and put the hat on Amy’s head. The duchess deeply missed her own daughter, who had been married off the year before, so she tended to coddle Amy.

Meanwhile Isabelle, who welcomed her shy daughter interacting with others, looked at the two of them with evident pleasure.

“Alec, go back in the house. You can’t go out today, remember? Now, Amy! We have a little gazebo, so let’s go play with Tigger over there. How about some tea, too?” she added with a wink, showing Amy the basket one of the maids was carrying. Inside were sweets specially made by the duke’s chef.

Ever since Amy had first been served the sweets and had gone a little overboard with praising their unbelievable taste, the kitchen staff seemed to be at the top of their game. She was a little embarrassed at her unchecked conduct, looking back, but she was pleased. She was never one to turn down delicious food!

“That sounds great, Duchess Camilla. Um...thanks for the company, Alec.”

“Oh, sure.”

Amy curtsied once more, turned around, and walked deeper into the courtyard garden.

After making sure the three ladies and single cat on the other side of the

hedge had disappeared from view, Alexander crouched down and buried his head in his hands.

“...This can’t be possible...”

The entire reason Alexander had come home from the school dormitories today was to attend a formal marriage interview with a prospective spouse chosen by his parents.

Alec, the youngest son, had an older brother and an older sister. Although he had made it this far without a fiancée, he also knew that, as the son of a duke, he couldn’t escape his fate of a political marriage forever.

But he had started going to school, and with learning so many things and making so many friends... It was the most fun he’d ever had in his life. Engagements and marriages just had to wait a little longer. Alec would simply meet the girl and make *her* object to the engagement.

If he used his good looks, put on an arrogant air, and treated her rather rudely, the fainthearted lady was sure to detest him... The plan wasn’t bad, but he had been using it on the wrong person!

And what’s more—he didn’t particularly think she was all that bad...

“Ugh...”

Alexander preferred slender, mature girls. So he was thrown into confusion when he realized he thought Amy, the exact opposite of his type, was cute.

Her features were rounded, her cheeks so plump he wanted to pinch them. She looked as cute as a button with her hands clasped in front of her chest. Her skin looked so alabaster and soft that he had felt drawn to touch it. He had been struck by her expressive face, her large, teary golden eyes, and her finely shaped lips as she passionately argued about love.

As he sat on his haunches and tore out chunks of grass, shiny black leather shoes appeared in the corner of his vision.

“Young Master, you’ll ruin your mother’s lawn that way,” a voice warned.

“Gramps... You were watching, weren’t you?”

“Well, my eyesight and hearing have gotten quite bad in my old age, you

know. But if you were to mistakenly fall in love with the wrong girl, that is something I'd certainly like to see."

What Alec heard was, "Oh, I was *definitely* watching."

As he felt heat rising up to the crown of his head, Alexander complained to his trusted butler.

"I hadn't heard we were supposed to have a guest this morning."

"Oh! You hadn't? That young lady has visited a lot recently. She's very charming... Quite popular among the servants."

The sight of a chubby girl innocently playing with a huge cat nearly her same size had melted the servants' hearts. Moreover, although she appreciated the differences of their social ranks, Amy's memories of her past life made her more concerned about showing deference toward those older than her. As a result, she was never rude to the servants, and she was always received by them very favorably in turn.

"The Earl of Northland... Does that mean she's Harold's little sister?"

Harold, who had already been making a name for himself as a dual-blade adventurer, was something of a celebrity at school. Alexander, whose high social rank prevented him from delving into dungeons, secretly admired him.

"Indeed. She is also one of the candidates to become Prince Edward's fiancée."

"Ed's fiancée?!"

The Third Prince had been Alexander's friend for as long as he could remember, always close at hand as both a playmate and a study buddy.

When Alec stood up, he was at eye level with his elderly butler. It was a strange feeling, realizing he was now the same height as the man he had spent so much of his life looking up to.

The butler was a crafty old man, but he was someone he could trust. Alec hadn't heard that Ed had been gathering marriage candidates, but it was probably true since the information came from the butler.

Alexander pressed him to explain further with a look.

“Lady Amy appears reluctant to attend her upcoming initial meeting with Prince Edward.”

“Are you saying she doesn’t want to marry him?” he scoffed. “He may just be the *Third* Prince, but it’d still make her a princess consort.”

“It seems Lady Amy is more interested in animals than marriage.”

“Hm...so she’s just a *candidate* to become his fiancée, huh?”

Suddenly, Amy’s face appeared right beside Edward’s in his mind. The girl who had just waltzed off and his childhood friend... Alex felt a strange sensation in his chest, but he wasn’t sure if it was a premonition or simply a prediction.

“Well, I wonder what will come of it.”

“Does the course of your love hinge on it, young master?”

“Watch it, Gramps...”

“Why, it’s just the ramblings of old age! Come now, it’s about time for you to prepare to meet your own candidate for marriage, young master.”

“...Sure. Got it.”

From the other side of the hedge, the duke’s son exhaled a heavy sigh and headed back toward the large house.

Chapter 3: Time for Tea

AMY sighed.

“Tigger... Pray that somehow I’ll get through this in one piece. And please be here to comfort me when I get back.”

“Amy,” Isabelle chided. “The only way this will end is with you going to meet him in person. So let’s just go and get this over with.”

Since first meeting Alexander, Amy’s days had passed without further incident. Tigger had finally been welcomed into the Northland family home, and now the day had finally arrived where the engagement candidates were scheduled to meet the Third Prince.

Nothing commendable could be said about Amy’s unwillingness to go, despite receiving an invitation from the royal palace itself, nor the way Isabelle spoke about it so flippantly. The Northland family, however, had been completely backward in their attitudes toward this engagement from the very beginning. The servants were all aware of this, so they were totally unfazed by the current conversation.

Today would be the first time Amy entered the royal palace.

She knew how much of an honor it was to be allowed to do so before debuting in society. She could tell just from the outer walls that the elegant castle was almost certainly breathtaking and magnificent on the inside... She wondered how much more excited she would be if she were visiting for just a tour instead.

The real reason that sighs kept escaping Amy’s lips was because she was still worried about her game theory. Even if this world was not exactly the same as the otome game she used to play in her previous life, it was at the very least incredibly similar. There were living doppelgängers of characters from the game’s opening screen everywhere, from the portrait of the Third Prince to her

older brother, Harold, and even Alexander, the son of the duchess who had given her Tigger.

Amy had had several opportunities to speak with Alexander after their initial encounter, and each meeting had only further fueled her suspicions.

The artist had been quite skilled at capturing the personalities of each character in the illustration. Under any other circumstances, Amy would simply be in awe of the artist's talent.

She very reluctantly stopped petting Tigger's carefully brushed, fluffy fur, and Tigger looked back with sad eyes and gave her a heartbreaking *meow*, making it hard for her to leave again.

She clung to him with one last hug and buried herself in his fluff, feeling totally comfortable, like she had been bundled up in the world's best blanket. She had been so nervous the night before that she'd had a lot of trouble getting to sleep.

Against Tigger's soft fur and warm body, Amy nearly drifted back to sleep before she was pulled away by Isabelle.

"Ah! Tigger! My blanket!" she mumbled.

"You'll stand out if you're late, you know," Isabelle warned.

"Okay, I'm going. Let's go. Right away."

Amy reluctantly heaved herself off the bed. Nothing was more dreadful to Amy than the prospect of getting noticed...



THEY finally arrived at the inner garden of the royal palace, just barely on time. Amy and Isabelle must have been the last to arrive, as the gates were quietly shut behind them. As a dreadful feeling came over Amy at the rattling sound of the locks being fastened, she heard her mother's carefree voice.

"Wow! Would you look at that? A fountain!"

"Huh? Oh, there is one..."

"Oh, Amy, you don't have to be *all* doom and gloom! It's a garden party. All

you have to do is say a few words to the prince and then pass the baton to the next young lady. Look, we have beautiful flowers to enjoy, and we'll be able to drink some delicious tea, too!"

"...Will there be cake?"

"Yep! And it'll be full of cream!"

As Amy lifted her head, giving a smiling seal of approval for her mother's plan, she saw that it was just as her mother had said—the flowers were gorgeous, in the fullness of bloom.

A thin stream of water flowed through the garden, gently winding like a natural brook, eventually connecting with a fountain surrounded by white stone.

The Northland family had a decent garden as well, and their land even included a forest. No part of their garden, however, was as exquisitely maintained as this one.

Amy was genuinely impressed and captivated. She had never really been interested in plants or gardens in her previous life, but in this world, there were so few other amusements to entertain herself with. She was developing an eye for natural beauty.

"It's beautiful, don't you think, Mom?"

"It's a good thing we came, if for no other reason than to see this. We wouldn't normally be allowed here."

As they were guided through the garden at a leisurely pace by a maid, Amy was able to admire the park—the beautiful flowers, the verdure, and the soothing sounds of the fountain—with rapt attention.

Around ten other groups of parents and children had already arrived. Many of the assembled ladies were close in age to the thirteen-year-old prince, but several others, including Amy, were younger. Amy watched them at the tables arranged throughout the expansive garden as they enjoyed themselves drinking tea or appreciating the flowers.

The premise of the event was that the queen had invited several ladies over

for tea. But—so the official story would go—the queen would suddenly become ill, so the Third Prince would appear in her stead to entertain the guests.

Other than the ladies who had been invited and their parents, the only other people in the garden were the royal maids and the knights on guard duty. Amy was a little relieved that the prince had not shown up yet.

Amy and Isabelle approached a table, chosen at her mother's recommendation, which was close to the building but far enough away from the entrance that they could relax with a view of the entire garden.

As Amy sat down, her chair, with cabriole legs as delicate as handmade lace, made a creaking noise... But instead of feeling the urge to run away in embarrassment at the tangible reminder of her weight, she was filled with a sense of security.

Since the day she had set her mind to it, she had steadily gained weight and was now an undeniably chubby girl.

Amy was not unhealthy, but to the young aristocratic ladies, who believed that one's outward appearance was the most important thing in life and that a fragile, rail-thin frame was fashionable, her body shape was unthinkable.

The knight and maid who had shown Amy around had widened their eyes in surprise when they first saw her, but as members of the royal staff, they were, of course, professionals. After that brief moment, they quietly returned to their work as if nothing had happened. As a show of respect for their wonderful poker faces, she smiled from ear to ear and thanked them for their discretion.

Amy looked around, and as she expected, every other lady attending the party was slender. Their dresses were even designed to show off their figures, with many of them wearing princess line dresses to expressly accentuate their small waistlines. Amy's dress was in the empire line style, where the dress loosely cinched under her bust and then softly extended down to her ankles.

Although her waist was hidden, anyone could imagine her body shape from her collarbone, so insulated it barely even poked out; her chubby upper arms, visible under transparent lace sleeves; and her squishy, pinchable cheeks. Because of this, when the ladies all over the garden saw Amy for the first time, their gazes had passed over her, looking relieved.

Between the ladies vying for the position of princess consort, shooting sparks from their eyes at each other, and the palpable tension of their parents trying to keep them in check, it was clear that Amy was not seen as a legitimate rival at all.

“No one’s paying any attention to me.”

Isabelle laughed. “Aren’t you relieved?”

“Yeah!”

There’s no way I’d get chosen in this group!

Confident now, Amy gave a small fist pump of success under the table. With the assurance she got from being so completely ignored, she was able to leisurely enjoy her tea. She’d resolved to make the best of the day, after all. She would appreciate the elegant scenery from the back of the garden, feel the refreshing breeze flow through her hair, and have her fill of aromatic teas and fruit tarts jam-packed with cream.

“This is so yummy!” she squealed.

“You’re so cute when you eat,” Isabelle said with a laugh.

Little did the mother and daughter duo from the Northland family know that, giggling and reveling in each other’s company, they were standing out for a completely different reason... The two of them, carefree and careless, were totally unaware.

A short while passed. They had just finished drinking their first cup of tea when it was officially reported to the party that the queen was unable to come out due to a sudden illness.

As soon as a royal clerk announced that the Third Prince, His Royal Highness Edward Leo Luducia, would be arriving in her stead, the atmosphere in the garden became even more electrified.

Amy was astonished at the sudden shift in mood, like a dozen lions were awaiting the appearance of a lamb with bated breath.

“It’s a little scary... I can’t wait to go home and pet Tigger,” Amy complained wistfully.

“Just a few hours left, dear. Hang in there.”

As they whispered to each other, loud cheers erupted in the distance. It seemed the Third Prince had made his entrance.

Everyone rushed to the area at once and formed an impenetrable wall of screaming girls, but Amy didn't move from her seat.

She stayed put partly because they had been told he would address everyone at least once, so in an effort to avoid a chaotic crowd, the ladies didn't need to come up and introduce themselves to him. But also, Amy wasn't sure getting in the middle of a crowd was a good idea.

But still...she wondered if he'd look like that otome game character in real life, like his portrait did.

She outright refused to become his fiancée, but she was still curious... She had come this far, after all. She straightened her back just a fraction and glanced his way.

She couldn't make out his face so far away and behind all those people, but she could tell he had inherited the king's tall stature. His dark blond hair peeked through a gap in the crowd of ladies surrounding him, and it briefly flashed, catching the sunlight.

“Wow, what a pretty color!”

“Isn't it? It's nearly the same hair color the former king's younger brother had.”

“Blue on its back and yellow on its sides... Is it a red-flanked bluetail?”

“What?”

It had not been the prince that caught Amy's eye after all—it was a little bird that had perched on the branch of a nearby tree.

The maid from the royal palace, who had been standing at attention nearby, jerked forward ever so slightly in surprise, but this, too, went unnoticed. Amy's eyes shone as she watched the bird.

“Yes, I believe it is,” said Isabelle, turning her attention from the prince to the little bird.

“They’re usually so wary, they hardly ever come out in front of people...”

“It probably feels safe because weasels can’t get in here.”

In their previous life, red-flanked bluetails were known as the bluebirds of happiness and could be spotted even in Tokyo. Amy never did get the chance to see one then. She didn’t know if it was the same bird in this world, but the bright blue feathers were still beautiful.

She stared at the little bird, trying to commit every single detail of it to her memory so she could try to draw it when she got home.

“...Maybe today wasn’t so bad after all.”

A beautiful garden, delicious tea, and a rare little bird made for a pretty good day, Amy thought.

Feeling like the tea party was already over, she listened to the faint sound of wings flapping, watched the blue bird fly off into the sky, and let out a contented sigh.

“Is something on your mind?”

...Huh?

She had been absentmindedly watching the bird leaving when the voice suddenly shook her out of her reverie. Sitting slightly diagonal from her, Isabelle froze in surprise, teacup suspended halfway to her mouth.

Although a terrible feeling came over Amy, she still hurried to stand up to greet the prince, but he politely waved away the gesture.

“Good afternoon. May I sit down?”



“Y-Yes, of course. Um, if you please... Hello.”

He had silky dark blond hair; a handsome, symmetrical face; and bright-gray, nearly silver, eyes. He was accompanied by two knights guarding him and one elderly maid. The prince sat on the chair pulled out for him by one of the knights—he was the spitting image of the portrait Amy had been shown before.

For some strange reason, that outrageously gorgeous face was smiling at her.

She vaguely felt like there were high-pitched voices squealing from far away, but her head was too full of questions to really notice.

Wh-Why is he over here?! Wouldn't he normally start talking to the person closest to him or go by family rank or something?! I can't get over how much he looks just like that picture...!

Unlike Isabelle, who recovered herself at once and was smiling normally, Amy could not stop blinking over and over.

“Forgive us for the intrusion,” the elderly maid whispered to Amy, taking pity on her clear inability to grasp the situation. “For safety’s sake, we had to suddenly change our plans and decided that the prince would converse with each seated group one at a time. You happened to be the only young lady sitting at the time, so you will be the first.”

Amy quickly looked around and saw that everyone had started rushing over to the tables.

Oh... I see. All right.

Now that she mentioned it, Amy thought it made sense. It would have been difficult to guard the prince in that crowd, and it would’ve been a huge problem if one of the ladies were pushed, fell over, and got hurt.

She was very relieved to hear this was why he came over to her first.

Edward continued his previous line of questioning.

“It looked like you were watching something.”

“U-Um... There was a pretty little bird. A sweet bird with blue feathers was perched on a branch on that tree there...”

Amy pointed at the branch, which was covered with bright green leaves. Edward gave a small smile at her answer and continued in a soft voice.

“Do you like birds?”

“Yes. Other animals, too.”

“So do you like dogs, then?”

“Yes, dogs and cats... I love all animals.”

She was saved by her favorite subject. Even if she wasn't confident interacting with other people—especially the opposite sex—she wasn't averse to talking about animals. Quite the contrary, it was one of her favorite things to do.

It seemed like the Prince had similar interests—he actually broke into a smile when he started talking about his dog.

Although they were both adolescents, equal in the sense that they both had not debuted in society, Amy's speech and manner were actually incredibly informal for an audience with someone from the royal family. But she had a reason for this.

Today's tea party was expressly prepared to see firsthand whether the candidates had the right temperament to be with the prince. That was why they had been given clear instructions to behave naturally, without worrying about etiquette and appearance more than necessary. However, even if that was the official statement, Amy knew they could always be punished for disrespect if they behaved too casually...

Amy had been unable to shake the villainess's bad ending out of her mind. She didn't want to get on the good *or* the bad side of the royal family.

Fretting over it, Amy had asked her parents for advice. They had told her that it didn't matter if she acted casually around him just as the instructions said. The most important thing, they continued, was that she behaved whichever way came most naturally to her.

Her father pointed out that there really wasn't anything to worry about, because even in the unlikely event that they tried to charge her with *lèse-majesté*—the crime of treason against royalty—there was no way she would

face the punishments found in a bad ending. They wouldn't break up her family, they wouldn't execute her...because the current punishment for *lèse-majesté* included house arrest, fines, or—most seriously—the stripping of one's noble rank. *Not* executions.

Even though the Northlands were nobles, losing that rank wouldn't cause great damage to them. Their land would probably be seized, but as long as the people living on the land were protected, it didn't really matter who was doing the job, her father had explained, laughing.

Not to mention that he could get a technical job in the private sector wherever and whenever he wanted. Harold's dream of being an adventurer, too, was totally unaffected by his rank in society. And most importantly, they had been commoners originally in their past lives. If they were stripped of their titles, they would just go back to being ordinary people.

Hearing that they would be fine even if she provoked the prince's displeasure had made Amy's heart swell with hope.

Plus, if her informal attitude was deemed unsuitable for a princess consort, that might even help Amy's cause! If it became part of the reason they would remove her from the list of candidates, all the more reason to celebrate!

"I heard you adopted a cat from the Duchess of Coverdale."

"I did!" Amy chirped. "He's *such* a cutie!"

"So it seems," replied the prince, amused.

"But he gets lonely so easily without me. I worry he's meowing out for me even as we speak..."

The bright smile that had emerged when she remembered Tigger immediately transformed into a sorrowful expression.

It was as if she was saying she wanted the tea party to end right then so she could get home as soon as possible, but as she spoke sincerely, looking totally guileless, the prince strangely couldn't detect any sarcasm in her desire to leave.

Just as Amy's attention was about to be totally carried away by the lonesome

Tigger, it finally dawned on her that the prince had known that she had become the adoptive parent of one of the duchess's cats.

"B-But...how did you know about that? Is the royal palace notified whenever a cat gets adopted or something?"

No money was transferred from the Northlands to the Coverdales during Tigger's adoption. The duchess kept a close watch on all her adoptions so that no one would use the opportunity to send bribes to the duke's family to foster political connections.

"I just want people who truly love cats!" the duchess would say occasionally, resentful. "It's so upsetting when people take a cat they don't even want just to make me feel compelled to do something for them in return. Those poor cats deserve better!"

Amy looked uneasy, but Edward grinned and shook his head.

"No, nothing like that. Alexander Coverdale has been my friend since childhood. I heard it from him."

Amy gasped. "Seriously?!"

Although she was surprised he was connected to another of the otome game's love interests, Amy was brought back to reality and nodded, realizing that it made sense. Edward and Alexander were so close in age, they had probably been steadfast playmates. And if they met frequently, cat adoptions wouldn't be *such* a strange topic to come up in casual conversation...

"I've heard you've met with Alec several times."

"Yes. When I would go to see Tigger, he—oh, Tigger is the name of my cat—he would be there sometimes."

She had thought that Alexander, one of the suspected love interests of the game, would have negative feelings toward her, but perhaps as a result of their overly passionate first meeting, they became able to speak casually to each other. Even though he didn't play with the cats, he would sit beside Amy and occasionally offer her sweets. And because he always provided mouthwatering foods, she'd end up accepting them.

Tigger was already used to Alexander, so he'd never run away from him either. As she spent her time petting the soft kitties and chatting to him, it was just like they were at a cat café.

That éclair from last time was particularly wonderful... That thin, soft, flaky pastry shell, filled with the perfect amount of smooth cream with a heavenly vanilla aroma, topped with chocolate...

Amy, who had been reliving the dessert in her head, suddenly remembered there was a *royal prince* in front of her, and she tried to brush off her silence by clearing her throat.

"What would you two talk about? Cats, I imagine?"

"Oh, no. Alec seemed to just want to hear stories about my brother..."

The moment she called him "Alec," an awkward beat passed between them, but Amy, whose mind had still been halfway in the duchess's cat room, didn't notice.

Alexander wanted stories of "the famous Harold" in exchange for his sweets. It looked like her brother and his dual blades had captured the hearts of his younger male classmates, too.

"...Yes, Harold is a frequent topic of conversation at the royal palace as well. The Order of Knights and Order of Magicians are squabbling about who will win him over as soon as he graduates."

"Really? I've always just seen him as my ordinary, goofy older brother..."

Amy was surprised that Harold was so popular among such important people. Her mother seemed to have already heard about this, however, because her calm smile never wavered.

Her brother's dual-wielding swordsmanship would certainly be accepted in the Order of Knights, just as his aerial combat magic would be in the Order of Magicians. Although these skills were simply a result of his passion for video games, that would be incomprehensible in a society like this where they were actually desired for a profession.

Naturally, such skills didn't exist in her otome game. Amy wanted to run with

that train of thought and convince herself this was just a world that resembled the game but was altogether different... But looking at the prince in front of her, the only thing she could think of was that opening screen...

Of course, she wasn't out of the woods yet.

She grabbed her upper arm as if hugging herself, fingers digging into her skin.

"...I have to get just a little heavier."

The springiness she squeezed her fingers into was the armor that protected her from her fate. It was also the source of the magical power that allowed her to put animals at ease and befriend them.

"Pardon me—what was that?"

"Oh! N-Nothing, Your Highness. Anyway, about that dog you have—"

"Ed."

"Huh?"

The prince smiled at Amy's puzzled look. Amy felt like she had a frog in her throat—it was the exact same smile tinged with loneliness from the game screen.

"You can call me Ed—not Your Highness."

"O-Oh, uh... Sure. Ed."

Although his expression didn't change that much when she called him by his nickname, his bright gray eyes lit up joyfully, and Amy suddenly lost her train of thought.



THEY continued to chat about animals until the old maid prompted him that it was almost time to move on. When he had finished with every table and didn't loop back around for round two, the tea party concluded without a hitch.

Upon returning home, Amy headed straight to the room where Tigger would be. Just as she opened the door, Tigger rushed toward her with his tail raised, as if he had been counting every second until her return.

Amy flopped down with a *thump* and threw her arms around the cat to

recharge.

“Tigger, I’m home! I’m so sorry. Were you terribly lonely? Oh, I’m so tired... It was exhausting, but...”

He was easy to talk to...

Almost surprisingly so.

Amy figured it was because neither of them touched upon the subject of the engagement at all.

It was definitely disturbing, seeing someone who looked exactly like that person from the illustration. But when they actually talked to one another, his gentle demeanor and polite way of speaking were exactly what one would expect of a prince. She hadn’t been frightened at all.

And at the end of the day, not only did he eagerly listen to her talk about Tigger, but he also seemed to enjoy talking about his own dog and horse. There’s simply no room for animosity or hatred when animal lovers have a conversation.

There was just one thing Amy was worried about—that smile.

Although he was older than Amy, Edward was only thirteen. If they were in Amy’s past life, he would be in junior high school. He should’ve been able to smile with fewer cares etched into his face. But the difference was like night and day when she compared Edward with the memories of her old male classmates from junior high school... Even Alexander, who was a high-ranking aristocrat in his own right, didn’t smile like that.

When she wondered whether being in the royal family meant restricting one’s authentic self that much, Amy felt a pang in her chest for him.

“I just don’t get it...”

As Tigger meowed softly, he rubbed his head against her, nuzzling her. Amy guided his large forefeet onto her lap. She filled the spaces between her fingers on both hands with his soft fur and then massaged the base of his ears. At the sight of his contented, happy expression and the feel of his soft fur, Amy felt her wound-up heart begin to relax.

Tigger's mouth always looked like a smile when it was closed. Amy put her fingers at the corners of his mouth and lifted her own to match.

"Say, Tigger... It'd be nice if Ed was able to smile a little more naturally in front of the person he's going to marry, don't you think?"

The person he's going to marry... In other words, not me.

There were many beautiful people at the venue who were worthy of becoming a princess consort. He spent longer talking at the other tables than he did with Amy, and his other conversations were animated, too.

You'll probably never talk to him again, Amy told herself.

Although she was relieved at this, her heart grew slightly heavy for some reason. But that was okay. If she slept wrapped up in Tigger's fluff, she would definitely be back to normal by morning.

Almost as soon as she finished that thought, there was a knock on her door and her mother appeared.

"Amy, I'll call right away for Mrs. Kelleher to come tomorrow. She'll take your measurements in the afternoon, okay?"

"What?"

"If I knew it was going to end up like this, I would have had us make riding dresses together before. I just thought we had more time until you needed one..."

Clueless, Amy hugged Tigger tightly on her lap.

"Wh-What are you talking about? Riding as in...horseback riding? I mean, I like horses, but... Huh? What is it?"

With a startled face, she looked past the elegant black fur tickling her cheeks and saw her mother laughing.

"*You* were the one who promised to go to the castle riding grounds with His Highness!"

There was half a second of silence.

"...What?"

“You don’t remember? When you two were saying your goodbyes to one another?”

Amy desperately racked her brain, trying to remember their last conversation...

“Unfortunately, it seems our time together is up,” he had said. “You’ll meet Ventus next time.”

And then Amy blurted out, “Okay, thank you very much for having me!”

Ventus... That was the name of the prince’s horse!

At the time, the only thing I had thought about was how grateful I was that it was all over, but...!

Amy let out a surprised yelp, finally realizing that her casual response had actually been received as an acknowledgment of their next meeting!

Intermission: A Nap Together

ONE afternoon, the countess returned home from a social get-together and had brought back sweets for her daughter. But when she reached the room where Amy and her cat should have been, she found it empty.

Her maternal instinct led her to the garden, and a gardener tending to the shrubs called out to her.

“Good afternoon, m’lady.”

“Oh, hello, Rob! You’re always so hard at work. You haven’t seen Amy around, have you? I thought she might have gone outside.”

“Aye, she’s over yonder.”

Half-shaded by his wide-brimmed hat, the old gardener smiled under his white mustache. He then brought an index finger to his lips in a silent shushing motion and looked pointedly toward the lawn on the other side of the hedge.

Looking like tiny mounds on the ground, Amy and Tigger were lying together at the base of an oak tree, snuggling so close their foreheads were touching. Their bodies rose and fell with breath at a slow, steady pace, totally at ease.

“Oh dear...”

“They were running around quite a bit before, but they’ve been napping like that for a while now.”

Amy’s body was bathed in warm sunlight, with only her face shaded by the tree’s shadow. It looked very relaxing.

Tigger was the first to notice Isabelle’s approach, although she had tried to be as quiet as possible. As the cat’s long tail flopped on top of Amy, he slightly raised his head and looked at Isabelle with his golden eyes that seemed to say, “Let her sleep a little longer.”

“What a good boy, always staying by her side...,” murmured Isabelle, stooping down to pet the cat while ruefully wishing that cameras existed in this world so

she could capture the sweet moment. Tigger relaxed his eyes and purred happily in response.

Chapter 4: The Third Prince's Predicament

THE king of Luducia had three sons and one daughter.

The First Prince was brilliant, skilled in both the arts and fighting prowess. Having already finished his investiture to formally acknowledge his position as next in line for the throne, he was preparing as much as possible for his future role.

The Second Prince, two years younger, supported the crown prince and was involved with the Knights of the Royal Guard.

The youngest child, the princess, was still quite young, but anyone who saw her spoke of how greatly she resembled the queen, and she had already received many offers of marriage.

In the shadow of such renowned siblings was the Third Prince, Edward Leo Luducia.

The exemplary First Prince and the irreproachable Second Prince made a complete set—the star performer and the understudy. Under such circumstances, the Third Prince, born nearly a decade afterward, was simply a spare, an extra.

As parents, the king and queen loved all their children.

But there was just one tiny little hang-up... The king and queen also knew that a power struggle for succession among their children would quite easily plunge the kingdom into chaos. For that reason, the royal children were assigned a strict hierarchy and given very clear roles. This would keep them from becoming the pawns of ambitious aristocrats, protect against unrest in the kingdom, and prevent foreign powers from turning the situation to their advantage. Lastly, these measures allowed for children born to the royal family to be able to live their lives with as few cares as was reasonably possible.

The king reserved his expectations and instructions for the First Prince alone. He had some direct contact with the Second Prince, too, but his contact with

the Third Prince had been, since his infancy, almost nonexistent.

Edward was receiving a sufficient education, although not as an immediate successor might. However, even here he was overshadowed by the brilliant First Prince and his flawless assistant the Second Prince, owing in part to their large age difference.

When the two older princes married their brides from foreign kingdoms and began producing more direct heirs to the throne, a path was set up for Edward to leave the royal family through a dukedom that had been established for him.

The process of selecting a fiancée for the Third Prince had a secondary purpose—adjusting the balance of power among high-ranking aristocrats by arranging for a Luducian noble lady to become his wife.

But the Third Prince understood why his parents, the king and queen, put these rules into place. Now that he had learned so much and gone through certain undesirable experiences himself, he empathized with them to the point that he thought he might have made the same decisions were he in their position. Since coming to these realizations, fewer people with ulterior motives tried to cozy up to him, but no one at the royal palace ever openly gave him the cold shoulder either.

Edward was not currently doing anything directly supporting the kingdom, like his two older brothers; nor was he expected to fulfill a certain niche role, as his little sister, the only princess, was required to.

He wasn't allowed to do anything that would draw undue attention to himself or get him in serious trouble. His role in this family unit was, for better or worse, *air*... Occupying space, yet completely invisible.



“I hear you’re getting engaged, Ed.”

“Alec!” Edward said, grinning as Alexander entered his private quarters. “I haven’t seen you in so long, and that’s what you lead with?”

Alexander flopped down on the sofa like someone who had done it a hundred times before. The maid in the room, no stranger to this sort of thing, laid out Alec’s favorite tea and snacks in front of him.

“You were going to keep this from your old friend? What am I now, a stranger?”

“That’s only because it came out around the time you got so busy with school you stopped coming over.”

“Oh? So now it’s my fault?”

“Should I have written you a letter about it?” Edward offered with a gentle smile.

Alexander shrugged awkwardly.

“I know. I’m sorry I haven’t been over for a while.”

“I was just joking,” assured Edward. “So you live in the school dorms? Is it fun?”

“Yeah, everything’s so different there. But you’ll see what I mean when you start next year—you’ll be in for a shock.”

Edward made a noise of mild surprise, nodding happily along. He ordered the maids out of the room as he took a seat opposite the sofa. After making sure the maids were gone, Alexander began to speak.

“So...which lucky lady’s the favorite to win?”

“I don’t think there is a favorite to win,” Edward said mildly. “Any of them would do the job fine, to be honest.”

“Really...?” Alexander asked, disappointed. “Well, I guess I figured you’d say something like that.”

“Really. If they’ve passed the scrutiny of the civil officials to make it to candidate status in the first place, there shouldn’t be anything wrong with them. I have no complaints.” Edward elegantly picked up a cup and saucer gilded with gold and spoke as casually as if he were commenting on the weather.

Alexander frowned at him.

“Marriage is one of the few essential public duties the Third Prince is bound by,” Edward continued.

“You’re talking about it as if it’s happening to someone else.”

“I guess it just hasn’t sunk in yet.”

“Which families are the candidates from? Any girls you’ve met before?”

Unperturbed by his questions, Edward readily gave him a few names—including the Northland family.

“Anyone you know, Alec?”

“I sat at a table with the daughter of the Marquess of Sandor at a tea party once. She’s older than I am and a real beauty. And the daughter of the Earl of Northland came to my house the other day.”

Edward made a noncommittal noise.

“Believe it or not, she adopted Tigger.”

“What?!”

Edward’s eyes widened into perfect circles at this unexpected news.

With that stupid expression, he’s finally starting to look his age, thought Alexander, looking at his long-time friend. Though Edward was one year younger, he had basically been forced to act like an adult since he was a child.

“Will Tigger be okay? He’s so shy...”

“You remember how he was really cautious around you at first, right? Well, with that girl, he was totally attached to her from day one. It even took my mother by surprise. The girl got along well with other cats, too, but in the end, she said she wanted Tigger. It sounds like she just really loves animals.”

“I can’t believe it! I just figured girls would be scared of a cat that big.”

“Right? But she’s unusual in more ways than one, that girl...”

“What does that mean...?”

Something about the way he’d said that gave off a different air than normal. But Alexander just shook his head.

“No way. If I tell you any more, you’re just going to get preconceived notions about her. You’ll have to see for yourself.”

Edward pondered aloud and started to say, “I guess anyone would do the job, but—” but he caught himself midsentence and instead said, “Sure. I understand.”

Alexander would always shoot him a glare whenever he’d let a careless response slip out, and Edward would send him an embarrassed smile in return. Although only a year separated them, Alexander always acted like an older, wiser brother.

“You like animals, too, don’t you, Ed?”

“Like animals...? Yeah, I guess.”

He had his own reasons for hesitating. Liking animals seemed pretty straightforward, but Edward assumed he probably liked animals a little more intensely than the Earl of Northland’s daughter did.

With his position and the rules that came along with it, Edward had been reluctant to ever complain. He had Alexander as a friend, of course, but he still resisted airing his grievances to him. Instead, he could only ever confess his deeply repressed emotions to animals, like his dog or, when he took him out on long rides, his horse. If a friend meant someone you could talk to about anything, then animals were more than enough to qualify as Edward’s dear friends—probably even his best friends.

With a small smile at that thought, Edward tried to redirect the flow of conversation.

“That reminds me, Alec—you had a marriage interview, too, didn’t you?”

“You knew about that, huh? It was just a casual get-together, though.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. For one, I’ve got no interest in getting engaged or married yet. For another, she’s still just a kid.”

The meeting had taken place as planned the afternoon of the day he had first met Amy. The girl he met with was only six years old. The interview hadn’t been requested with any serious designs to contract a marriage but seemed rather to be the result of optimistic impatience. The proposal had no particular

advantages for the Coverdales, but because the go-between had been a friend of the family, they had to meet at least once to preserve everyone's honor.

Alexander hadn't been putting on an act, but apparently his absentminded attitude made the other family sense that he was not interested. He got a long-winded lecture about it from his parents, but luckily for him, that was the end of it.

"Well... No matter how much I dislike it, I'm only really delaying the inevitable."

"Why not say something?"

"Well, it's just...complaining's not really going to change anything, you know?" Alexander lapsed into contemplative silence for a moment before asking, "At least you can choose from your list of possible fiancées, can't you?"

"Sort of."

"Really take a good look at your candidates, Ed."

Edward was shocked at the sudden seriousness that had slipped into his friend's voice.

Alec was never like that. He always wanted to keep things light and joke around. That lightheartedness also helped distract Edward from his own feelings. He had been right—Alexander was acting odd today. He wondered if it had something to do with going to school or living in the dormitories.

"Until you make a decision, my hands are tied," Alexander muttered.

"What?" Edward had totally missed what he said, too distracted wondering about the changes that had suddenly come over his friend.

"It was nothing," Alec said, suddenly seeming to return to normal. He put down his teacup, stood up, and looked out of the window at the combat training grounds below. "Shall we head to the training field?"

They had been each other's sparring partners since they were little, for both swordsmanship and magic.

Edward nodded and put his cup back on the saucer.

“That’s right—General Riley’s out there today.”

“What?” Alec groaned. “Are you serious?”

“He was really excited about it. Said he wanted to see if you’d been slacking since going off to school. It’ll be fun—Kevin said he wanted to come spar, too.”

“Kevin, too...? I, uh... I think I just remembered there’s something I have to do...”

“You’re not running away from this, Alec.”

A few minutes later, Alec could be seen heading toward the training grounds, head and shoulders slumped over slightly, accompanied by a very pleased Edward.



ON the day Edward had met his fiancée candidates, the sky had been clear and blue all morning.

Because the tea party was occupying the inner garden of the royal palace, they would have needed to reschedule if the weather turned stormy. And postponing or canceling the event would have been a huge hassle, considering the burden on the administrative officials in charge of organizing the event, as well as the knights and maids responsible for security and all other preparations.

So Edward, who had no way of knowing there had been at least one lady among his candidates who had desperately prayed for rain, sighed with relief when a maid pulled back his curtain and he was met only with sunshine.

The Third Prince had worried himself so much over what the weather would be like that he had spared no thoughts at all to the reason for the whole event—his future wife.

And even then, he only really ever thought of it in terms of the lead-up to his official duties as Third Prince, which would increase after his fifteenth birthday, when he came of age.

“Look, Prince Edward! Come this way. You can see the ladies from here!”

“That’s all right. I can see them when I meet them in the garden.”

“Oh, come now, Your Highness, don’t be like that. It looks like almost all the candidates have arrived!”

Edward had been waiting in a second-floor room overlooking the inner garden below. The head maid, who had been with Edward since he was a child, beckoned him over to the window.

“Everyone looks so gorgeous, don’t they? Princess Florence will look just like them in a few years...”

“Don’t get so close to the edge, Hannah.”

The large windows had incredibly slim railings, constructed more for decoration than for safety. Not to mention, even though they probably wouldn’t be noticed from the angle below, it would be very awkward if the ladies realized they were being watched.

Nevertheless, it was only natural that the senior head maid—who usually interacted with only adults and his little sister, Princess Florence, in the course of her duties—would be interested in the young ladies.

As she beckoned him again, Edward put on a forced smile and approached. The faint, elegant voices of the ladies below drifted through the open window.

“Don’t you think that canary-yellow dress would look good on Florence?”

“I think Flo would like it in light pink better.”

“Yes, I’m sure she would agree with you there,” said Hannah, nodding her head fondly, the smile lines at the corners of her eyes deepening.

When Edward saw his sister last week, she was covered in pink, from her head ornament to her shoes. He had heard it was a phase a lot of little girls went through, but he was still surprised when he saw the stuffed rabbit that she would never part with had suddenly become pink, too.

“There’s the Marchioness of Sandor and Lady Judith. She is three years your senior and has already debuted... She’s the very picture of femininity, is she not? On the other side is Lady Christina, the one wearing the hat with the camellia flowers, who is the daughter of the Earl of Levit, and—”

“I’ve already read their files, Hannah.”

“Your Highness!” she chided. “This lady might one day be your wife!”

Edward had already looked over all the portraits and documents that had been brought to the antechamber where they were currently waiting. He simply pointed to the mountain of papers stacked on the table. Hannah let out a quiet sigh.

As Hannah doubled as the go-between, Edward understood her concern that he should show a little more interest.

But, Edward thought to himself, they all look the same.

The civil officials chose the ladies assembled in the garden because they were “in good order.” Their appearance, their status, their etiquette... He was sure even their thoughts were in good order, too. They had checked off all the boxes, their temperaments deemed suitable for a princess consort. They were like dolls that had passed all quality checks, ready for sale.

He could easily imagine how similar they would look and speak when he went down to the garden to talk with them. He was told it wouldn’t be like that when he actually met them, but he was doubtful. Nothing set them apart other than the color of their dresses.

“But then again, they must see me superficially, too.”

The ladies gathered here, vying for the position of princess consort, must have surely only seen him as his title, the Third Prince.

On the ground, the garden was bustling with activity, but under the brilliant veneer, everyone was strategizing. The feeling was palpable in the air.

I’d rather go for a long horse ride than to a tea party like this. Nothing would feel better than turning my back to the garden, heading to the stables, getting on my favorite horse, and riding under the cloudless sky.

But Edward never revealed his true feelings, not even to his long-serving maid.

“My apologies, Your Highness. Did you say something?”

“Just that it’s probably time to head out, don’t you think?”

“That’s right. If you’ll wait just a moment, I’ll double-check that everything’s

ready.”

Hannah took out a pocket-watch-shaped magical communication tool from her pocket and contacted the guards downstairs. From what he could overhear, he inferred that not all the guests had arrived yet.

Edward’s eyes had drifted from the window to the magical tool, waiting for the head maid to hang up before speaking.

“The Earl of Northland made that, right?” he asked.

The director of technology at the Institute of Magic had established a reputation for his inventiveness and skill. Many of the newer magical tools were born from the earl’s innovative, eccentric ideas. He was someone Edward would love to talk to if the opportunity arose.

“Yes, and I’m able to get many things done because of it! But speaking of which, they say the Earl of Northland’s daughter hasn’t arrived yet... Oh! Is that her just now...? Oh my!”

With one hand lying on the side of the window frame, Hannah let out a rare shout of surprise.

“What’s the matter?”

“How can she look so different from what I...I...”

Hannah regularly directed the younger maids to do tasks without ever raising her voice. She was always so steady and calm during sudden accidents. What on earth could have shaken her up this much?

The maid rushed to the table where the documents were stacked, muttering to herself how it was strange, how the portrait given before was different...

With a sidelong glance at her, Edward returned to the window. Looking down over the garden, he saw the mother who had just arrived, and then he saw...her daughter.

Her dress was made with an abundance of soft ivory lace. Other than a few yellow roses pinned to her matching hair accessory, which complimented her black hair, he couldn’t see any other accouterments. After entrusting her closed parasol to a maid, she waited for someone to show her the way. From what he

could see from the second story, she had a figure that set her apart from the other ladies.

She's chubby.

"Huh..."

The daughter of the Earl of Northland. She had been highly recommended by the civil officials.

Although he had never been directly told this, he knew it was so because her file had been placed at the top of the stack and because a triumphant report had been given when the officials had received the blessing of the Earl of Northland, who had at first protested that his daughter was too young.

He had heard that the earl was politically neutral and that the Margrave of Wallum, Amy's grandfather, adored her. He also knew that Amy herself was known for having high magical aptitude and that her older brother was a skilled adventurer.

The ranking of an earl would not normally be suitable for a marriage to the royal family. But for the Third Prince, who needed to be as unobtrusive as air, it was indeed very fitting.

In other words, there would be few entanglements and many benefits from the match. There would almost certainly be no better partner.

From Amy Northland's portrait, she looked very refined, indeed almost chilly. Her figure should have been petite and slender.

I don't know about that...

"S-S-Something must have happened! She looks like a pig— No, that's not... Oh my dear! Maybe she's sick?"

"Her complexion looks good. It doesn't look like she's injured either," Edward explained calmly to Hannah, who was looking in a panic from the portrait in her hand to the girl outside.

Sandwiched in between the maid guiding her and the knight guarding her, Amy slowly and with a light step made her way inside the venue—closer to the building where Edward stood. Although she seemed nervous with everyone's

eyes on her, alongside her mother she returned pleasantries flawlessly.

When Amy arrived at her table, she was presented with a huge plate full of all sorts of sweets, and she happily started to fuss over them. She would gaze at the fountain or the flowers, and from time to time, she and her mother would lean in toward each other to talk about something, smiling like they were actually enjoying themselves.

It was as if they had simply stumbled into a tearoom that happened to have magnificent scenery, so clearly out of tune with the tense undercurrent in the garden.

Perhaps caught up in the genuinely joyful atmosphere the pair radiated, even the maid and knight who accompanied them looked at ease.

“That Isabelle, what is she up to—”

“—She’s different.”

Hannah’s grumble overlapped with Edward’s private musing.

She was completely different from Edward, who always lived his life with his paramount concern being how “the Third Prince” was seen by those around him.

Even though Amy’s appearance was far removed from what was expected of her as a lady, the sight of her smiling naturally looked positively dazzling to Edward. In the crowd of girls who all looked the same, only one was different: Amy, the daughter of the Earl of Northland.

The words of his childhood friend echoed in his head.

But she’s unusual in more ways than one, that girl...

“Your Highness?”

“...I want to talk to her,” muttered the prince, not once taking his eyes off the garden. Hannah’s eyes widened.

After collecting herself, she quietly withdrew back into the room. She rebooted the magical tool in her hand once again and connected to the knight in the garden in charge of security.

“Who’s with Alyssa at the Countess of Northland’s table...?” she whispered in a low voice. “That’s right, it’s Darios... No, have him stay there. Tell him not to miss anything, because I’ll be talking with him later.”

Edward was so enraptured he couldn’t even hear the exaggerated murmurs of disappointment from the guests through the window as it was explained that the queen was unfortunately unable to make it to the tea party.

Chapter 5: The Riding Grounds

EACH time Amy pinched the back of her hand, she hoped she wouldn't feel any pain, just so she could prove this was all a dream. But that moment never came—her hand just started to sting.

A carriage from the royal family had come to the Northland house to get them and was now quietly shepherding them to the riding grounds of the royal palace.

Dressed in her freshly made navy-blue riding dress, Amy squeezed her hands together on her lap, looked around the extravagant interior of the carriage, and let out a sigh like the grumble of a complaining cat.

“Mom... I've gained weight, haven't I?”

“Of course. You're very plump and cute, dear.”

Her mother, sitting beside her, tried to drive the point home by pinching her round cheeks, but Amy looked up with tears in her eyes. She didn't need reassurance—she was looking for an explanation.

The whole reason Amy had intentionally put on weight was to provide a neutral, blameless reason for her to be removed as a contender to marry the Third Prince... Although, ever since realizing that increasing her weight also stabilized her magical powers, Amy wasn't sure if the prince was her primary motivation anymore.

“But there were loads of skinny, beautiful girls at the tea party! I had assumed today was going to be a group outing, but I was the only one invited...”

The royal palace had even sent a messenger to personally carry the written invitation all the way to the Northlands' house. The arrival of such an unusual visitor had even shaken up Claude, the ever-stalwart, composed butler of the Northland family.

When Amy had asked how many other people had been invited, the

messenger smiled and told her, “Only you, my lady!” It was a wonder she didn’t fall over right then and there.

“Could the prince prefer bigger girls...? Like a chubby cha—*youch!*”

Isabelle started pulling at both of her cheeks midsentence and shut down her suspicion with her best smile.

“Scandalous, Amy! I have many friends in the castle, but none of them have ever said anything like that. And anyway, if I knew he liked chubby girls, I would never have suggested you put on weight.”

Amy nodded, knowing that was true.

“Then why is this happening?”

“Probably because you answered him with a yes.”

Amy had no idea she was accepting anything at the time, much less that he was extending an invitation! She thought they were exchanging parting pleasantries. But the more she thought about it, the more she wondered if he had just offered to be polite... It was very possible he considered her a huge pain in the neck because her thoughtless acceptance meant he had to follow through with his offer.

With hindsight, Amy now keenly understood the advice she had been given so many times before—that when interacting with others in society, she had to be very careful with what she said in casual conversation, even though she was a child.

“Cheer up, Amy,” Isabelle said with a sigh. “You have a cute new riding dress, *and* you get to see horses! Don’t you like horses? Grandpa would always give you rides on his horse, remember? Besides, you were fine talking to the prince at the tea party. It’ll be all right.”

“But that was because we only talked about animals last time...”

“Then just do that today, too!”

“I hope I can, but...”

Amy looked very reluctant. Isabelle gently stroked her cheeks and then drew back the curtain hanging over the small window of the carriage. Quickly

glancing outside, she mimicked the tenor of a train conductor from their previous lives.

“This, uh...this carriage is approaching its final stop! We will soon be arriving at Royal Castle Riding Grounds Station! Make sure to leave your belongings! No, no, wait, even better!” Isabelle suddenly changed tactics. “A wise princess once said, ‘Courage need not be forgotten, for it is never remembered’!”

“I can’t believe you got both of those references wrong!” Amy laughed, finally cracking a smile.

Joking around almost made it feel like this was just a normal outing. When the coachman stopped the carriage and placed his hand on their door, all he could hear from inside was the sounds of their laughter.

But the one who opened their door with a grin was not the coachman but the Third Prince himself! Amy immediately clammed up again.

“Y-Your Highness,” she stammered.

“Welcome back. But please do call me Ed.”

“Th-Thank you for inviting me today, Ed...”

When Edward, still smiling, extended his hand to help her out of the carriage, it didn’t feel like he was doing it out of begrudging politeness or obligation at all.

...Could he genuinely have wanted to invite me?

As questions swirled around her head, she was led out of the carriage a little awkwardly by the prince. After she had descended, one of the knights serving as the prince’s guard helped Isabelle out while Amy exchanged brief pleasantries with Edward’s other guard, who was waiting for them, and the maids she had met at the tea party.

Unlike the day of the tea party, the sky was covered with thin clouds, but it was actually easier to be outdoors without needing a parasol to block the light.

The carriage had been parked right in front of the expansive riding grounds, in the back of which was a large stable. Several horses had been taken out inside the fenced area. They were either being attended to or casually walking around.

“It’s wonderful...!”

As expected, both the facilities and the horses were exceptionally fine. Her eyes were so glued to every magnificent detail, Amy forgot that the prince was still holding her hand.

“That black horse in the back is Ventus.”

He led her closer to the fencing and raised his other hand slightly. The black horse noticed it before his caretaker did and started happily trotting over.

Amy’s heart sped up as Ventus approached, his legs moving gracefully. Now that she saw him up close, she noticed he wasn’t exactly black—he was seal brown, a shade of brown so dark that it often appeared black from afar.

The caretaker finally caught up, and both he and the horse were introduced to Amy from the other side of the fence.

“This is the stable master, Marvin Douglas. Marvin, this is the Countess of Northland and her daughter, Lady Amy.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Douglas.”

Mr. Douglas was an elderly man with pure white hair and a white beard. Far from frail, however, his solid frame and the way he held Ventus’s bridle exuded strength and control. His hair color and age reminded Amy so much of her grandfather that she gave him a rare natural smile during their introductions.

“Please call me Marvin. I’d heard you liked horses and was really looking forward to meeting you. Now let me introduce you to Ventus, too. Ventus, come,” he ordered.

Ventus, who was stretching his neck over the fence toward Edward and lightly bobbing his head, looked very intelligent. Amy could also easily see from the state of his beautiful shiny black coat that he was being very well taken care of.

She was surprised. The way Edward was looking at Ventus and petting his snout appreciatively reminded her of how she behaved with Tigger.

Amy jumped in surprise when Ventus met her gaze, his eyes framed by long eyelashes. *Why are animal eyes so captivating...?* she wondered.

There were many types of magic in this world, but she had never heard of any

that let people talk to animals. It was such a shame. Her heart practically sang at the thought of how wonderful it would be to converse with animals.

Nevertheless, he is a really beautiful horse.

As Edward petted the strong and wise animal, Ventus's eyes nearly closed, absolutely content. Edward looked totally relaxed, too, and Amy started to understand that this was a relationship of not only trust but genuine love.

"He's so cute..."

"Do you want to try petting him?"

"A-Are you sure? Uh, okay, then... Ventus, may I?"

As Marvin recommended, Amy slowly approached the horse as she introduced herself. When she touched him, his coat felt smooth and velvety. She stretched her arm and petted him around his neck, which was warm, muscular, and limber. It was different from Tigger's soft, fluffy, heavy fur, but they both felt very nice.

Ventus looked like he was enjoying her gentle pets, too; he was breathing heavily from his nose, lightly blowing on Amy's face with each exhale.

"That tickles!" she giggled.

"Why, you two seem to have become fast friends!" said Marvin. "If you're that comfortable around horses, why don't you hop on?"

"Oh," chimed in Isabelle quickly. "Unfortunately, my daughter can't ride on her own yet."

"Then she can ride with me," Edward suggested happily.

"Wha...?!" Amy's mouth fell open in shock, but because she was still so close to Ventus, she protested in a whisper. "N-No, Ed, you don't have to—"

"I'm very good at horseback riding," the prince continued, smiling. "Riding with someone won't be a problem at all for me."

"His Highness is so skilled, he can even ride bareback," Marvin added helpfully. "There's no need to worry."

"Wow, that's amazing!" Isabelle gasped.

“M-Mother!”

I think so, too, but that’s not the issue here!

Amy’s complexion seesawed from red to white as she stammered and pulled at her mother’s sleeve. The stable master smiled at the two ladies and then cheerfully tossed Amy a lifeline.

“Well, even though you don’t have to worry about his riding skill, His Highness may not be used to riding with another passenger. Lady Amy will have to pardon this old geezer for the presumption that I may be her riding partner for the day, instead.”

“Indeed!” chirped Isabelle. “Amy always rode horses with her grandfather, so she’d probably be more accustomed to that arrangement.”

From the way Isabelle and Marvin laughed with each other, it was almost as if this had been their plan from the start. Amy breathed a sigh of relief.

Edward was the only one who looked a little disappointed, but when another horse for Amy was brought over, her attention was totally distracted by the new arrival, a light-brown female horse named Fente. Amy was very appreciative when she heard this one was so gentle, she had recently been used by Princess Florence for riding practice.

Amy whispered to Marvin in secret that she was worried about putting her weight on the horse, but he just smiled and told her it would be totally fine. It would be just as strenuous as placing a baby kitten on her back.

Amy wasn’t too sure about that, but it did help ease her worries. She still mentally apologized to Fente for being so heavy when she got on the saddle, though.

After Amy waved to her mother, who was going to wait for them back at the stables, they left the riding grounds and headed toward a walking trail. Marvin guided Fente to walk beside Edward and Ventus.

A wild, natural landscape expanded beyond the well-maintained road. From their high perspectives on their horses, the stunning view made Amy’s spirits soar.

Neither Edward nor Marvin could help but to smile at Amy as her golden eyes darted here and there, sparkling in genuine wonder, and she occasionally petted dear Fente's back.

They had almost reached the halfway point of the trail, their conversation thus far on neutral and mundane topics, when the prince said those fateful words, spoken so casually, that shattered Amy's tranquility.

"So, I want to talk to you about the fiancée candidate thing..."

Amy's mouth clamped shut. Her heart stuttered in panic as the conversation she most desperately wanted to avoid was tossed at her so suddenly.

If she had been holding the reins, her reaction might have thrown Fente into a panic. Luckily, however, Marvin was so unperturbed it was as if he had suddenly become deaf.

"I may be off base, but I get the sense you think it's a little too early to be talking about marriage."

To Amy's ears, it sounded like he didn't want to move forward with the engagement, either. Her breath evening out, Amy nodded fervently.

"Th-That's right... And also, my mind's pretty preoccupied with Tigger at the moment," Amy lied in a quiet voice. The real reason for her reluctance was that otome game. She couldn't exactly tell him that, of course, but she hadn't told him lies either. Amy's whole world *was* Tigger right now, and she *did* think she was too young for marriage.

In this world, Amy was only ten years old. At that age, she would've still been in elementary school in her previous life, and in the last memories she had of that life, she had only been in high school—far too young for marriage. Even if early marriages were the accepted practice here, that didn't change the way she felt.

Amy, who had stared at the ground as she spoke, couldn't tell how Edward was reacting.

"I thought so."

She was relieved. His voice, at least, had not changed. It sounded neither

angry nor disappointed nor overjoyed.

“But to be honest with you, you were the only one I enjoyed talking to at the tea party.”

“What?!”

“The other ladies didn’t seem to be all that interested in animals.”

“Oh, so that’s why...”

Amy finally relaxed her shoulders and looked up. Her unabashed relief caused Marvin to secretly smile to himself.

“So how about—for now—we become friends, instead?” the prince proposed.

“F-Friends?”

“Yes. I’ll start going to school next year, but unfortunately my only close friend is Alec. That made me realize that we could talk about animals, but we could also talk about what you’ve heard about the school from Harold.”

Friends... If she wanted to completely rid herself of her worries about the game, it would be best not to have any interaction or contact with him whatsoever.

Amy knew that very well. But...

“Um... There really wasn’t anyone else you liked at the tea party?”

“No one. Even if they did have a cat or dog, they just looked bored when I tried talking about their food or care,” Edward said, smiling but looking a little embarrassed.

Amy pressed her lips together.

Edward loved animals. That much was clear from their conversations and how he treated Ventus.

She wasn’t going to quote Harold exactly, but there was some truth to his argument about his girlfriends. It *was* fun discussing things you enjoyed.

But Edward said he didn’t have anyone to talk about these things with...

Alexander was the prince's friend and the son of the notorious cat-loving duchess, but he didn't seem to have that great of an interest in animals. Other ladies would probably try to keep up with the conversation if Edward asked them to, but it wouldn't be enjoyable for either party if it was forced.

Amy couldn't immediately refuse his offer.

"But...I—"

"I couldn't ask this of anyone else."

Edward's quick response cut through her confusion, and she could almost physically feel the sincerity in his voice.

As long as it's just talking about animals and my brother's stories from school...it should be all right...I hope.

Her conversations with the prince had been interesting. He even took care of his own horse, instead of leaving everything to the caretakers... Plus, he had such a gentle manner and tone of voice, she had never felt scared around him.

As she debated internally, she looked down and saw her chubby hands.

If he just thought of her as someone to talk to—not a fiancée candidate—it wouldn't make a difference to him if she were fat or skinny. *That's probably what all this was about in the first place*, she realized.

Then, when he would go off to school the following year, he'd probably be able to make friends right away. Amy was sure he'd choose a proper fiancée then.

That would be the expiration date for their friendship.

As soon as she thought this, her heart felt strangely unsettled. She had never before experienced the feeling of anxiety and dissatisfaction mixed into one.

The prince waited patiently as Amy remained silent. Only the rhythmic clomping of the horses' hooves reverberated around them for a while.

"I don't, um... I think that's okay."

Of course, just as Amy had opened her mouth to refuse him, the exact opposite answer had come out!

“Really?! Well...thank you! Now that we’re friends, may I call you by your name?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, s-sure.”

Huh?! What—what did I just say?! Wait, scratch that!

While she sat there, taken aback at herself, Edward whispered Amy’s name a few times, as if getting used to the feel of saying it, and gave her a dazzling smile.

That smile didn’t have a shadow of sadness anywhere.

“Well, Amy, we’ll go left at the next fork. There’s a stream down that way.”

“O-Okay.”

“I really hope you’ll be able to talk to me just like a normal person.”

Am I supposed to act all chummy with the prince right away?!

Amy was shocked at how quickly everything had changed, but Edward looked really happy... Once she saw his first genuine smile, she just couldn’t bring herself to take back what she’d said.

However, if they were going to talk as “friends,” they would talk about mutual interests only—animals, Alexander, and whatever tidbits about school she happened to hear from her brother. That was it.

These conversations were safe. They wouldn’t require any mental calculations or vigilance on Amy’s end, and they would never spiral into other topics.

Plus, if she thought about it, she was worried that rejecting his offer would only leave his opinion of her stained. With a casual friendship that would naturally grow apart when the prince got busy with school, they’d probably just become strangers with fond memories of each other.

And with a relationship like that, even if Amy did get into any trouble from the bad ending, she might be spared from receiving inordinately cruel treatment... But it didn’t take long for Amy to put a stop to that train of thought. She felt ashamed for thinking of Edward in such a calculating way when he was offering her genuine friendship.

But she still couldn't stop the game's opening screen or the "otome game villainess" novels from sneaking into her mind...

A little time later, when they had fallen back into familiar, casual conversation, Edward asked, "Do you have plans to get any more cats?"

"I do not— Uh, I mean...nuh-uh." It was quite difficult trying to talk to him casually, but every time she spoke semi-respectfully, he would get a sad look on his face, so she'd correct herself midsentence. "However—uh, I mean...but Tigger only just started living with me. I think I will someday, though."

She loved animals—she loved cats. So Amy wanted to give her cats the best care possible. She would welcome getting more naturally down the road, like the spontaneous way she met Tigger, but she didn't want more just to start a collection.

Amy stared off into the distance, remembering Tigger, who waited for her again at home. He was quite used to her parents by now but still shy of the house servants.

As soon as I get home, I'll give you lots of pets! Amy promised in her head.

"These days, I just always want to be with Tigger."

"I understand that feeling. You really like him, don't you?"

There must just be some things only animal lovers can understand.

"Yes, I love him!" Amy affirmed with an innocent smile, her whole face lighting up. It was the widest smile Edward had seen her make since their first meeting. He was momentarily struck speechless.

There had been so many other cats at the Coverdale house, and they had all been cute. Although she couldn't bear to compare cats against one another, Amy herself had no idea why she had been so taken with Tigger.

Even when they were apart, the very thought of him warmed her heart and made her smile. Her mother would tease her that she must have fallen in love... but with a cat instead of a boy.

"I knew Tigger was special from the beginning... I just love him so much."

"I-I see."

“Ed? Your face is red... Are you hot?”

“N-No, I’m fine! I just got startled by something, you know, and th-that’s not very good for your heart, and...”

Amy couldn’t hear what he mumbled after that. He said he was fine, but Amy thought it might be better if they traded places, so he could ride under the shade.

She suggested the idea to him, but he just repeated that he was fine, which made Marvin laugh.

“My word, aren’t you adorable?” Marvin asked Amy, laughing.

“The adorable one is Fente!” Amy protested. “Just look at those long eyelashes! What a beautiful little lady!”

Marvin laughed again. “I think you’ve lost to a horse, Your Highness.”

“...Marvin.”

With a strange expression on his face, Edward looked forward. He seemed to have calmed down a bit, although the tops of his ears were still red. If he could return to normal so quickly, Amy figured he must really be okay.

As if Fente knew she had been complimented, her gait became even lighter. As Amy petted the smooth base of Fente’s neck, wondering if it would upset the horse if she braided her mane, Marvin suddenly pulled on the reins.

When she looked back, not sure why they had stopped so quietly and abruptly, she saw Marvin staring into the depths of the forest trail, his seriousness a stark contrast to his previous joviality.

Edward noticed immediately from his reaction that it wasn’t something trivial.

“What’s wrong?”

“A cry came from over there, Your Highness.”

Marvin put an index finger to his lips, motioning for them to be silent. Amy followed his lead and listened carefully. Then, she faintly heard the leaves rustling, the sound of the wind, and the weak, high-pitched cry of a bird.

The strained sound was nearly inaudible over the sounds of the leaves, and it

didn't last for very long. But Edward seemed to know that cry—his expression shifted at once.

“...Roodle?”

“I did hear he hadn't returned since he last left to deliver a message...,” Marvin said, as if he'd suddenly remembered. The two of them exchanged glances and looked even more worried.

Amy, heart beating erratically in her chest, asked who Roodle was, and they explained it was a messenger bird from the royal palace.

A few years ago, the prince explained, he had gone out on a long horse ride and came across the fresh corpse of a bird. It looked like it had been killed by magical beasts. You could never let your guard down around magical beasts. When he investigated the surrounding area, he found a half-destroyed bird nest in a tree with baby Roodle, injured and weakened, inside. Edward adopted the orphaned Roodle, so young he couldn't even fly, and raised him with Marvin and the other caretakers.

“His wings are so strong that he could fly to the ocean from here with ease,” explained Marvin. “So the person in charge of his care had gotten worried, because Roodle hadn't come back at the expected time.”

“We have to check,” said the prince.

The three of them nodded and got off their horses, fastening them to a nearby tree. One of the escorts that had been trailing them at the rear of the party joined them as well. Coincidentally, it was the knight Darios, whom Amy remembered accompanying her at the tea party.

Edward was usually guarded by two knights, but Marvin, as a former member of the military, fulfilled the role of the second guard. Darios, therefore, was the only knight traveling with them—the other knight had stayed behind with Isabelle at the stables.

Darios was intense, with sharp, observant eyes that radiated complete focus and attention... In her past life, she would have pinned him for a member of the yakuza. But she was only frightened of his outward appearance—in every other respect, he was incredibly polite.

Looking at him, Amy reflected on her own self-centered, incorrect assumption that Knights of the Royal Guard were gangly, feeble men who cared more about outward appearance and social status than skill.

Marvin suggested that the rest of the group wait there while he went to check it out alone. Edward protested.

“I’m coming, too. It’s better to bring backup in case you get hurt, and I also helped raise Roodle. Amy will stay here.”

It was natural for him to get so worried. Even after Roodle had grown up and became a messenger bird, Edward would still care for him occasionally.

But this time, Amy shook her head in protest.

“I-I’ll go, too. I can do a little healing magic.”

The other three looked surprised at her offer.

Many girls started learning magic from a young age. However, being able to use it as a technique required training and the stabilization of the user’s magical power... This typically happened much later, around the time they went off to school.

Although Amy came from a family with high magical aptitude, in the end this was a matter of her individual talent. No one had ever thought someone so young could actually use magic—and healing magic, a very difficult specialty, at that.

“What...? You know how to use healing magic already?” Marvin asked, meeting Amy’s eyes with a serious expression.

“I’ve healed my brother’s fractured finger and cuts about this big,” said Amy, indicating with her fingers a width of about two inches. “But I’m, uh... I’m not sure how effective my magic is on animals.”

Any act of medical care is built on trust as the foundation. *I just have to explain it better...*, thought Amy as she clarified her statements.

“But I can’t make the injuries heal right away. It took a couple days for his wounds to heal and his bones to fuse back together.”

All this had happened during the family’s test to prove if she had learned how

to do magic. Whether she could get a cat had depended on the results.

Harold had waltzed back home with a deep gash at the edge of his right eye—almost exactly where the otome game character had a scar—and two fractured fingers on his left hand to boot! But despite this, Harold had joked, “It’s just what you need for your test, isn’t it?” Apparently, he had not avoided the magical beasts’ attacks on purpose just to get injured...

The way her mother’s eyebrows rose when she learned that was terrifying. He sat there getting lectured with his head bowed while Amy performed healing magic on him. Amy agreed with her mother, privately thinking that it’d do him good to feel a little remorse.

Amy had trembled as she healed him, afraid the gash would leave a scar and transform him into a perfect clone of the character from the game. But she had used all the magic she had and healed it perfectly, despite it being quite a deep cut.

When she told them about this test, Marvin and Darios doubted their ears.

A wound incurred from a magical beast was very different from a regular sword cut. And Amy claimed she had healed one the day *after* it had been inflicted and *without* leaving a scar. Even with a bone fracture, recovery was unbelievable—the standard magical treatment only involved reducing pain and speeding up recovery, not fusing the bones back together.

Amy herself didn’t seem to know how amazing her story was, but Darios, who had suffered injuries during his training, and Marvin, a former member of the military, were keenly aware.

Only a few doctors in the royal capital could perform the level of healing magic Amy had performed. Healing magic worked by amplifying and accelerating the patient’s own powers of recovery. It was also vital to discern whether forcibly healing an injury was necessary, as it could be hard on the patient and often have an adverse effect on their recovery.

And although it was possible to counteract poisons and expel foreign substances with healing magic, it wasn’t all-powerful—if something was removed, it couldn’t be grown back.

Healing magic was also more effective when used by practitioners who had a thorough knowledge of the subject's internal anatomy. From Amy's memories of her previous life, she had advanced knowledge about the human body for this world, so her healing magic was effective as long as her magical powers were stable.

But unfortunately, she didn't have any knowledge at all about bird anatomy... Besides, if that bird—which might be Roodle—didn't have any strength left, performing any healing magic might prove to be difficult.

But Amy couldn't just stand around and twiddle her thumbs!

Marvin, however, stooped down to Amy's eye level and looked concerned.

"That is reassuring, but there's lots of undergrowth here. You might get hurt on the thorny branches."

"I'm wearing boots today, and I'm used to them already, so I'll be fine! Wouldn't it be better to treat him as soon as possible?"

They still seemed to be hesitating on whether to allow their guest—the daughter of an earl—to walk down a trailless path into the forest. But Amy flashed the high-laced boots that matched her riding dress and smiled reassuringly.

Ever since she was a little girl, the natural landscape—the mountains, the seas—that sprawled across her father's land and her grandfather's estate in the border province had been her personal playground. She had often swum, fished, and even climbed trees.

She had usually just stuck by her older brother's side, but now that she thought about it, they probably weren't the sort of adventures "noble ladies" were supposed to have. She supposed she had been allowed because her parents had both been reincarnated from a different world, with different expectations. Plus, they had always been an outdoorsy family.

At that moment, the sound of the bird crying reached them again. It sounded even weaker than it did before.

Edward nodded to Amy, who was so worried she felt on the verge of tears.

“We don’t have time. We’ll all go. Amy will come with me,” he said, suddenly grabbing her hand.

When Amy looked up, surprised, Edward smiled and gave her a nod. With the prince’s backing, Marvin finally accepted it.

“I’ll take the lead, then, and Darios will bring up the rear.”

Although Roodle was nearing retirement, he had the best track record of all the messenger birds. Edward was very grateful there was someone there who could perform healing magic. Both Marvin and Darios could do emergency first aid treatments, but magical remedies were often more effective.

Amy’s surprised eyes alternated from the hand Ed was holding to his face.

“E-Ed, I can walk on my own.”

“If you don’t want to hold hands, I’ll carry you.”

“C-Carry?!”

“It’s dangerous out there,” he explained simply. Amy’s heart thudded.

D-Does he even know what he’s saying?!

No matter how you looked at it, Amy’s body was going to be heavy in the prince’s thin arms.

Amy had wanted to gain weight, but she still felt shy about it in some respects. God forbid, if the prince were to collapse while carrying her bridal-style, she felt like she would lose an essential part of her identity as a woman!

She quickly grabbed his hand back and squeezed it tightly.

“...That’s a shame. Don’t let go, then.”

*A shame?! **What’s** a shame?!*

Pretending not to hear, Amy could only give a stiff nod after making sure their hands were linked securely.

Edward’s hand was surprisingly large and firm under his glove. Amy’s heart skipped a couple of beats. It felt so different from when she held her mother’s or father’s hand, but if this was what she had to do to avoid being carried, she didn’t really have a choice.

The forest was dense, just as she had been warned. But there was no hesitation in Marvin's footsteps as he pressed on, pushing tall grass and branches out of the way, relying on the bird's cries for direction.

Amy had started breathing harder, but she followed Edward and didn't fall behind.

"It's somewhere around here."

After moving forward for a moment, Marvin stopped. There was a small, dark, wet spot on the tree in front of them, with white feathers scattered around it.

Amy sucked in a quiet breath, her heart shattering when the scene of the tragedy came into view.

Edward released Amy's hand, removed his glove, and used his fingers to whistle loudly. There was a muffled noise very close by, as if in response.

Thank goodness, it's alive...!

Marvin instantly used his arm to brush aside the thicket ahead, where the noise came from. Inside the thicket was a large owl with pure white feathers stained dark red, but with one of his wings extended, his attempts at movement were clumsy and awkward.

Amy gasped. "It's Hedwi—"

"Roodle!"

Amy had totally forgotten to ask what kind of bird Roodle was... She had almost called him the name of an owl character from a famous fantasy movie and book franchise from her previous life. Fortunately Edward's cry had dwarfed hers, and it didn't seem like anyone had noticed her slip-up.

Amy had covered her blabbermouth with her hand, but she gasped at the sight of the pitiful bird.

Despite being weak, Roodle was very excited to see them. But it was dangerous for an injured bird to move. Marvin removed the coat he had been wearing, and when he covered the bird's head with it, Roodle finally settled down.

"He calms down when he can't see anything," he explained to Amy, who was

watching with concern as he wrapped Roodle up in the jacket.

“I see.”

“The bleeding seems to be coming from the bottom of his torso, just around the joint of his leg,” Marvin continued, holding the bird up.

Darios peered at the wound as Amy and Edward drew closer.

Marvin told them of his suspicion that Roodle had probably been coming back from wherever he had been injured, but he had run out of stamina and fallen here before he could make it to the castle.

“He probably hurt his wing because of the fall,” he continued. “But fortunately, it doesn’t seem to be broken.”

“That’s good—well, maybe *good* isn’t the right word for it...” replied Edward. “What caused the original injury?”

“This is no arrow wound, Your Highness,” said Darios. “I’d wager it’s from a magical beast.”

Roodle would go wild whenever anyone tried to get a closer look at the wound, so no one could say for certain, but Marvin, who also had some experience hunting magical beasts, agreed—it had almost certainly been done by such a creature.

Edward continued his inquiry with a stern look.

“But the flight paths of messenger birds avoid all magical beast habitats, don’t they? Darios, have you heard anything from the Order of Knights?”

“Just that there had been strong gales coming from the west last night. Maybe he had been blown off course.”

Marvin and Edward nodded at this.

It was to Roodle’s credit that he had managed to return so close to the castle in his battered state. Amy didn’t know what caused his injuries, but she knew she had to do something to fix them.

“U-Um, is it all right if I treat him now?”

“That’s right—yes, please do,” said Edward. “Please watch out for his beak

and claws. He's usually calm, but he's very on edge right now."

Nodding, Amy sat on the ground and gently brought the bundle that cocooned Roodle onto her lap without the slightest bit of hesitation.

She was a little surprised—he was heavier than he looked.

"There's a good birdie, Roodle... You'll be all right, now," Amy said soothingly, removing her gloves.

Healing magic worked by touching the patient's body directly. So as Amy continued to murmur sweet words to Roodle, she gently slipped a hand under the cloth. This way, he wouldn't panic, and the cloth wouldn't slip off midtreatment.

Edward kneeled next to Amy and looked on anxiously, but she couldn't afford to worry about him. Because as soon as her fingertips touched Roodle's feathers, he started twisting violently. When Edward put his hand over the cloth and called out to him, the bird calmed down once more. *Roodle really thinks of Edward as his parent...*, Amy realized.

His soft feathers were hard and stiff in places, probably because of the bleeding and the mud he had fallen into.

Poor thing... That must have been so painful and scary...

Each time she touched one of the stiff areas, Amy felt her throat tighten, and hot tears threatened to spill from her eyes.

Although they were separated by layers of cloth, it was surprisingly painful when Roodle's strong claws dug into her thighs. But Amy knew this was nothing compared with how much pain the bird was in...

Taking a deep breath, Amy imbued her hand with magic.





THE riding grounds at the castle were enormous, as were the stables.

The stables were mostly composed of horse stalls, but it also had a residential annex for the caretakers and a large lounge, where royalty and nobles who were visiting or touring the facilities could sit and talk.

After being casually shown around the area, Isabelle had been ushered into the reception room and was feeling totally at ease, absorbed in conversation. Her conversation partner was none other than the Third Prince's head maid, Hannah, who coincidentally had also been Isabelle's governess as a girl.

"Hannah, I am so pleased to see you haven't changed a bit!"

"That's supposed to be my line, Lady Isabelle," said Hannah. "So—was this all your idea?"

Isabelle blinked, staring back blankly, looking so innocent and childlike that Hannah could hardly believe she already had a teenage son.

"What were you thinking...?" tutted Hannah. "And when your daughter had such a beautiful face, too..."

Isabelle seemed to read between the lines, as she pouted and let out a sigh.

"I think it was a mistake, too."

"But you can still—"

"Amy was an unbelievably beautiful little girl, but when she gained weight, she only became even more beautiful!" Isabelle exclaimed, lamenting about the unexpectedly adorable transformation. "She may be my daughter, but she's killing me here!"

"K-Killing you?"

Isabelle started to gush about Amy in front of the entire party—Hannah, taken aback at how drastically Isabelle had misunderstood her, and the other maid and knight stationed with them.

"Her little cheeks are so round and plump, and her hands are so squishy and soft! Her stocky arms are just so full of life and vitality—they look so nice, don't

they? Of course, her health is always at the forefront of my mind, and I always try to balance her meals and physical exercise. And now her skin positively glows—her hair is so lustrous!”

“U-Um... Lady Isabelle?” Hannah managed to squeeze in, but Isabelle was just getting started.

“But Amy’s getting a growth spurt. With her metabolism so high, if we relax our routine, she’ll just shoot up in height and get skinny again! Maintaining her figure is quite a challenge! You see, despite how she looks, she loves being active. Even at home, she always runs around in the garden with her cat... But exercise *is* important. It wouldn’t be healthy if she didn’t get adequate activity.”

“I-Indeed...”

“And she burns up so many calories during magic practice, too... Well, Amy’s very willing to cooperate with me on things, so we do manage to maintain her weight pretty well. But—frankly speaking—I’d like to see her gain five more pounds. I’m well aware, of course, that our goal isn’t just a number on the scale, but I get so worried that if her petite frame were skinny, she could so easily be abducted and carried away! And then—”

“Lady Isabelle, please!”

“But, Hannah—! You’ve seen her, haven’t you? Those cute little chubby cheeks! Don’t you just want to squeeze them?”

“I, uh... I can’t say I do.”

Her cheeks certainly did look like they would feel soft and squishy, and the beauty of her facial features shone through the chubbiness surrounding them well enough.

But that was never the issue.

“I have no idea what you mean about ‘calories,’ but I can gather that quite a lot of work went into maintaining her figure. If it’s so difficult, then why go to all that trouble...?”

“Beauty standards change as quickly as the direction of the wind, you know. I just don’t think people should obsess over something so temporary that they

lose sight of what's really important."

As Isabelle looked at Hannah, her gold eyes were filled with certainty.

Hannah had known for more than twenty years that whenever her former pupil had that look in her eye, her mind was made up.

"...His Highness is a very fine gentleman," Hannah said.

"I agree with you there. But if he were a lord or a bard, it wouldn't make a difference—all I want from life is my children's happiness. That's all. It's just that simple," Isabelle concluded impressively, like she had just finished giving a speech to parliament.

"But you couldn't think of any other way?"

"You can't change someone's face or personality. And you must admit, it's a pretty effective way of weeding out people who base their decisions on appearances alone. Besides"—she shrugged—"she draws power from her body when she uses magic, too."

Hannah had known that Isabelle's daughter had a high magical aptitude. She had also heard that Amy had recently started to get serious about her magical studies.

"That's true," Hannah admitted. "But she didn't have to start so early."

"She had her reasons. We didn't force her into it—she wanted to do it more than anything."

Amy had wanted to learn magic as quickly as she could so she could get a cat—that had been her clear purpose.

Isabelle chuckled to herself. To Amy, her reason for studying had been a matter of utmost importance, but Isabelle thought other people probably wouldn't see it that way.

Isabelle was able to show others her daughter's seriousness about magic simply by the speed at which she had learned it—which had in fact greatly surpassed Isabelle's own expectations.

"I know you, Lady Isabelle, so I didn't assume you had forced her to do anything absurd," said Hannah. "Who is she studying under, by the way?"

“Sir Dion, at my father’s introduction. He said she was much more talented than she looked!”

Everyone there, including Hannah, gazed at Isabelle in amazement.

Sir Dion used to be the head magician of the royal palace. He was currently a teacher at the Royal Academy, but he was infamous for being mercilessly strict with his students. Even now, he was one of the top magicians in the country, but others found him very intimidating and had a hard time approaching him.

The knight in the room couldn’t help sitting a little straighter as he remembered the tough lessons Sir Dion had given him.

“Sir Dion?!”

“His teaching methods are very good, and he seems to get along well with Amy. That shy little girl is so taken with him, sometimes she’ll call him Professor Pop-Pop in secret!”

“What?!” cried Hannah, looking like she doubted her own ears. “That’s unbelievable. I— Oh!” Something started ringing in Hannah’s pocket. “My apologies.”

It sounded like a bell, but it was actually Hannah’s magical communication device. Isabelle urged her to answer with a pointed look, so Hannah quickly excused herself from the table and answered the call.

Although the magical device couldn’t be used at long distances, calls could be made within the castle grounds, making it very convenient for communication between the servants.

“Darios? What’s happened...? Well, yes... I understand. Please take care.”

Isabelle still had some time before Amy was supposed to return. But if one of the knights guarding them called, something unexpected must have happened. When no panic or impatient anxiety crept into Hannah’s face, however, Isabelle assumed it must have been a low-level emergency.

Isabelle slowly brought her teacup to her mouth and savored the flavor while Hannah finished the call.

“Did something happen to Amy and the others?” she asked.

“They found an injured messenger bird, so they should be returning soon.”



AMY and the others returned to the same place Isabelle had seen them off, with the prince on his black horse and Amy and Marvin on the bay mare.

The only difference was that now there was a lump of cloth in Amy’s arms.

Isabelle, who had waited outside with the head caretaker of the messenger birds, called out to her daughter when the party approached.

“Is that the injured bird, Amy?”

“That’s right. It’s a snowy owl named Roodle.”

“I heard you performed healing magic on him,” said the caretaker, full of emotion. “I’ve been worried all day when he didn’t return this morning. I can’t thank you enough...!”

As the caretaker looked up at Amy so appreciatively, she felt a little bashful.

“I did. But that was my first time using it on a bird, so please look over him and make sure everything’s okay.”

When she tried to hand Roodle to the caretaker, however, the bird—who had been peaceful and quiet the whole ride back—screeched loudly and stirred, resisting.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Roodle?”

When Amy held him tighter to avoid accidentally dropping him, he suddenly quieted down.

“...Are you all right now? Look, it’s your caretaker.”

But as she tried to extract him from her arms, he once again cried and resisted. After repeating this twice more, Marvin suddenly got off the horse and helped Amy down, bird and all.

“Whoa!” The swift motion took Amy by surprise. “Th-Thank you, Marvin.”

Marvin smiled. “He certainly doesn’t want to be parted from the nice lady who healed his wounds!”

She was pleased but also worried—he needed to be seen by a veterinarian.

“Roodle, won’t you let the doctor see you? Just once? I want to make sure you heal properly.”

Her words made no difference—he continued to squirm restlessly and cry in protest. Edward had gotten off his horse and joined her. She looked at him desperately for help.

“Amy, you’ll visit Roodle, won’t you?”

“Yeah! See, Roodle? I’ll come back to see you again really soon, so you can let go now. Please?” Amy spoke in nearly a whisper, leaning over the bundle in her arms and speaking through the fabric.

Roodle started to get a little quieter. Not wanting to miss the opportunity, she swiftly passed him to the caretaker. They could hear Roodle crying again in a sad grumble.

Amy was glad they had finally been able to make the handoff, but her suddenly lightened arms felt strangely cool... Roodle was crying out for her, and it broke her heart. She felt tears falling from her eyes.

“It’ll be okay,” assured Edward. “We’ll make sure he heals up perfectly.”

“I’m glad,” sniffed Amy, “but...”

“Your healing magic is amazing. Even though I was only sitting nearby, I could feel its warmth... So please don’t cry.” Edward removed his gloves and wiped the tears from Amy’s eyes with his fingers.

She jumped at his gentle touch, suddenly aware of how close they were standing.

“E-Ed?” she stammered.

The shock put a complete stop to her tears, and her cheeks flamed bright red. There was a soft smile in Edward’s silver eyes, as if he was relieved to see she wasn’t crying anymore.

“I’d be in trouble if Alec knew I had invited you to the castle and made you cry.”

Why on earth is he talking about Alexander...? She didn't really understand, but the awkward expressions from everyone else were kind of embarrassing...

Momentarily disorientated, before she realized it was happening, Amy suddenly found herself making promises to visit the castle "frequently" so she could "visit Roodle."



A week following the tea party but some time before the riding outing, Edward had paid a visit to the Coverdale estate. It was the first time he had been there in a while. Alexander was visiting for the weekend, and they were up in his room.

Alexander had ordered the room to be cleared, so the only other person around was the well-known elderly butler, standing quietly in front of the door.

Edward, who had taken his usual seat on the sofa opposite Alec, was finding it hard to speak. Nevertheless, he met Alec's eyes as he told him what had happened at the tea party.

"That's why I invited Amy to the riding grounds," he concluded.

"Ah... So it was just as I thought, huh?"

Putting his teacup back on the table, Alexander folded his hands behind his head and leaned back on the sofa.

"Alec..."

"Don't get me wrong," Alec said, laughing. "It's not like I fell in love with her or anything."

Edward didn't get the sense his friend was lying, but it didn't totally feel like the truth, either. No matter what Alec's feelings were, however, Edward's own feelings could not be changed.

"But you *did* meet her first."

"It's not first-come, first-serve," Alec said, laughing again. "To be honest, I was interested in her. But I prefer my girls a little skinnier."

"I don't care about looks," Edward protested.

“You don’t? Well, you probably would think that way. You don’t really have a type, do you?” asked Alexander with a blank look. “I thought you’d like her, though.”

“Yeah... I want to talk to her more—talk to her properly—not just in short little bursts.”

“Hey, that’s great. But just so you know, I’ve met with her a few times, and she doesn’t seem interested in marriage *at all*.”

Edward had also gotten that sense from her.

Even though she was at a tea party intended for selecting a princess consort, each time he tried to even vaguely touch upon the subject, he felt her throw up an invisible, impenetrable wall between them. But they did end up having a lot of fun talking about cats and horses because of it, so maybe it had been for the better.

Edward sensed that Amy thought the engagement was something to be avoided rather than sought after. This was later corroborated by what the maid and the knight overheard at her table.



IT was a few days after the tea party.

The maid and the knight were a little nervous—they had never been in the Third Prince’s private room before. But luckily Hannah, whom they knew, was there, and the meeting proceeded smoothly.

“Lady Amy and the countess hardly talked about the engagement at all...,” the maid, Alyssa, testified. “Yes, they talked about things like the food and the fountain... No, she never talked about what she’d do after becoming princess consort, nor did she gossip about the other ladies or anything of the sort... After that, she complained about wanting to go home a lot. She talked about the cat she left back home. Her attention was drawn to the doors when the prince arrived at the garden, but she had not actually been looking at him... She was looking at a little bird. I nearly fell over in shock...”

The maid continued, “She was very polite to me about the tea. Told me it was delicious, thanked me for making it...”

For maids, making tea was just part of their job. Alyssa had been working at the castle for five years, and she had made tea hundreds—if not thousands—of times. Guests simply expected it to be brewed perfectly. Many didn't even drink it and just wanted it out for show.

"I have been scolded about the tea before, but...that was the first time I had ever been thanked personally, and...it made me really happy."

"I see... All right. How about you, Darios? You were with her ever since she arrived at the castle, weren't you?"

"Correct," Darios answered. "I acted as her guide from the moment she got off her carriage. I believe she must not have been used to seeing a knight's armor, because she did stare at me initially."

The countess had apologized for her daughter's rude stare, explaining that Amy's father worked at the Institute of Magic, and there weren't any knights in their family. Amy's grandfather had a small army on his border province, but the equipment and armor must have been different and new to her.

"I was a little worried that having someone like me as a guard would only make the lady cry, but she didn't. She treated me just like she treated everyone else."

Darios was tall, sturdy, and looked a little intimidating. If not for his suit of armor, he would more easily pass for a mercenary than a knight. He actually had a gentle personality, as well as a wife and child, but even his son's friends were scared of him because of his appearance.

"When we had arrived at the inner garden, she thanked me, too, for showing her the way."

The civil officials had crafted a plan at the tea party to see how the princess consort candidates would react when presented with knights who had, like Darios, slightly uncouth appearances.

Although he was the third child, Edward was still a part of the royal family and would still be involved with diplomatic affairs after marriage. The civil officials had also worked out the lessons his fiancée would need to take to fulfill her role as his wife in an official capacity.

“Then she muttered, ‘Well, I’m here...,’” finished Darios.

“...I see.”

All of this indicated that Amy really wasn’t enthusiastic about the arrangement. Edward looked at the maid and the knight and grinned in appreciation.

Hannah’s subtle investigation had revealed that Amy had started putting on weight right after the unofficial announcements had gone out to the engagement candidates. When Hannah had first learned this, her head fell into her hands, knowing this was just the sort of crazy plan Isabelle would come up with.

It became clear that Isabelle didn’t want Amy to become a princess, and Amy herself didn’t want to, either.

“...What will you do, Your Highness?”



“**SO**, what are you going to do?” Alec asked, interrupting Edward’s reverie.

Feeling a sense of déjà vu, Edward met Alec’s eyes again.

“Maybe we’ll start off as friends... But I think it’ll be up to her if she’ll be able to see me that way.”

“You’re not going to order her to be your friend?”

“Forcing her would be pointless. I want to talk to her just as she is now.”

Amy’s face always showed what she was thinking.

Edward could also simply order her to be his fiancée—choose her from among the candidates. But the moment he did that would be the moment her face clammed up and froze, forever emotionless. It would be no simple task to defrost it.

Edward puzzled over her methods... Why would she go so far as to change her body just to politely step down as a candidate? He didn’t understand why she would go to such lengths to refuse the position of princess consort, one in which she could typically have more of the things she wanted.

What he *did* know was that until she opened her heart to him, he'd never figure out the reason.

"Good. I wouldn't stand for it if you did force her."

"Alec...", started Edward.

"Don't worry, Ed. If you're giving it your best shot and she's not shooting you down, I'm just going to cheer from the sidelines."

Edward could end it all with a royal order, but he said he wouldn't do it... Alexander laughed.

"...That's all you'll be doing," Ed stressed.

"Let's hope so."

After blowing through a few other topics, Alexander wished his friend luck once more and saw him out as Edward headed back to the royal palace. Alexander returned to his room and poured the last of the now-cold tea into his cup.

"Shall I brew you a fresh pot, young master?" the old butler asked.

"This is fine."

"...Is everything all right?"

Alexander knew he wasn't talking about the tea.

"I really like those two."

"Indeed, young master."

"It's best if you can be a friend."

"A friend, young master?"

"That's right. That way, you can see everything much more closely without ever losing your position, don't you think?"

As he returned his empty cup to the tray the butler was holding, Alexander thought about the slightly eccentric daughter of the Earl of Northland.

Although Alexander was the youngest child, he was the direct descendent of a duke, so he was used to people looking at him and calculating what they

wanted from him or for him. Some people were better at hiding it than others, but everyone approached him with ulterior motives.

He was aware that he had grown a bit calloused over the years, having received looks like that since before he could remember, even as a child... At school, he was treated more or less equally, but there were still plenty of people ready to pander to him.

But Amy Northland was a totally different matter. She was quietly cautious.

Although he had provoked her during their first encounter, she treated him normally even after she had guessed he was the duke's son. She was awkward, which had somehow removed the distance he had tried to maintain. She was incredibly serious, which had made it impossible to ignore a story he had washed his hands of.

Then, as he had gotten a little used to her ways, she showed him raw emotion—and then an unfiltered expression overflowing with tears. Amy may not have been used to interacting with people, but he believed she had simply been born with these qualities about her.

She's interesting, he thought.

It wasn't as if she had no common sense. She had a decent understanding of etiquette, too. But it was as if her understanding of interpersonal relationships was different from everyone else's. Never selfishly seeking things from other people, she never had to be calculating or vigilant with others.

Amy was younger than he, but sometimes the way she thought about things made her seem his age or older. He would even lose track of time talking with her... Alexander had a hunch, one now nearly confirmed, that his childhood friend, with a life even more restrictive and controlled than his own, would be taken with her.

"Well, if Ed had planned on forcing matters with her to progress, I would have done things differently, too." Alexander nodded slightly, the corners of his mouth turning upward. "Gramps, if a fiancée candidate were to step down after receiving an offer from a prince, it would be rather hard for her to find another suitor, wouldn't it?"

“Indeed. For whatever reason, others would speculate that there must be something wrong with the lady. Many would also decline out of respect for the royal family. A good suitor would probably be hard to find.”

“Right. And then, if she were accepted by the family of a duke, that would tie up all the loose ends very nicely.”

“...I see. You mean to say that you won’t get married yourself until you’re certain of their fate, then?”

“I must really like her, huh... Well, we’ll see what happens,” Alexander said, sounding content as he reclined.

Intermission: The Matta Fruit Scuffle

ONE day, before Amy had adopted Tigger, she visited him at the Coverdale estate. She had become a regular feature of the house at this point, so as she was taking her usual route to the cat room, the head butler she had come to know well called out to her. He was accompanied by a maid pushing a cart.

He dropped a shriveled-up fruit into the palm of Amy's hand. It was dried, brown, and roughly the size of a chestnut.

"Gramps, what is this?"

She *had* asked for his name before, but the dashing silver-haired butler had politely told her, "Please call me Gramps. Everyone does." Amy, embarrassed and flustered, had nodded without argument.

"It's a dried matta fruit. Cats love it more than anything else. But I'd suppose one would call it an indulgence. It's been a while since I'd last procured some."

Amy guessed it was something like a dried *matatabi* fruit from her previous life. Although she knew *matatabi* was much more intense than catnip, she had never seen it in person before, so she couldn't exactly compare the two... But the names were similar enough.

"It's an appetite stimulant, too. When I find a cat isn't eating much, I crush up a small amount and mix it into their food. I used some the other day, in fact, on a cat we just took in."

"Really?"

Amy noticed that next to the cat food on the cart was a mortar and pestle, which already had a small amount of crushed dried matta fruit inside it.

When she picked up the mortar, Amy detected a plantlike odor, but she wouldn't call it a particularly *strong* smell. It did nothing for humans, but the smell and taste were irresistible to cats.

The butler, who knew that Amy was going to adopt Tigger, would sometimes

teach her different things about cats. This must have been another one of his lessons.

“It’s similar to alcohol for humans. Even if they want more, you mustn’t give them too much of it.”

Amy nodded obediently and the butler smiled. Then they entered the cat room.

Cats would normally come up to Amy when she visited, but today, as she held the mortar with the dried matta fruit, they ran at her with frightening speed.

“Oh, now, now, kitties!” said the butler, trying in vain to calm them down. “Lady Amy, hand the mortar over here—”

“Ahhh!”

Tigger led the stampede, and as cat after cat climbed up her dress, Amy, with a mixture of elation and panic, was totally overpowered.

She lifted the matta fruit above her head, but just as she tried to hand it to the butler—one of her hands slipped.

Before she could say the word *oops*, Amy felt something falling—sprinkling—onto her hair.

She saw the cats’ eyes literally start glowing, hypnotized as they were by gluttony.



“...**JUST** *what* is going on here?”

“Oh, young master! There’s been a terrible accident. I was just wondering how we could extract her...”

“Extract who? Where is Amy?”

Alexander had come down because he had heard that Amy was there, but he could never have predicted the astonishing sight that awaited him.

All the cats in the house had piled into a heap. As they chirped happy little meows, they rubbed and nuzzled against *something* that had fallen on the floor. Underneath the mountain of cats, he could just barely see the hem of a dress...

“I-It’s my fault!” came a muffled voice. “Don’t get upset with the cats!”

“Huh?! Is that thing under there *Amy*?! Look, tell me not to get upset all you want, but— Oi! Tigger! *You* get off her, at least! Aren’t you totally squished?”

As cats clung to every single inch of her, it looked like she had been swallowed up by a sleeping bag of cats, her body entirely covered in fur. Amy was in heaven, being nuzzled by cats so ardently and fervidly... But as it got harder and harder to breathe, perhaps Amy was getting closer to that heaven than she realized...

Even though Tigger refused to leave her side and swatted at them, Alexander and the butler somehow managed to peel him off. They were able to pull off most of the others, too, and then when only a few “small” cats (normal-sized cats, but small compared with Tigger) remained, Amy was able to escape from Cat Mountain, totally out of breath.

“Hey, are you okay? I mean...you look like a mess.”

“Y-You’re one to talk!”

The two looked at each other, hair disheveled, clothes totally crumpled and creased, surrounded by cats and tufts of fur...

But Amy, cheeks slightly pink, still seemed happy. Alec looked shell-shocked; he was covered in scratches and holding an overwhelmed Tigger in his arms. Only the butler looked normal, somehow unscathed.

“...How are you totally fine?” Alec asked the butler grumpily.

“I suppose an old-man’s wisdom can be applied to many different situations,” he replied serenely.

Amy finally couldn’t hold it in anymore. She broke out into hysterical laughter, which softened even Alec’s expression. They always remembered the day Amy’s merry laughter reverberated throughout the duke’s estate. It was also the day they learned a very valuable lesson—one should not, under any circumstances, lift dried matta fruit above one’s head.

Intermission: Waiting at Home

“TIGGEEER, where aaare you?”

The Northland family servants combed through the garden looking for the cat, one of them holding up his food dish.

The countess and her daughter were out at the royal riding grounds. The servants were trying to give Tigger his midday snack, as instructed, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Did you see him?” one asked.

“No... It’s weird, isn’t it? He’s almost always out here.”

There were a few places in the garden that were his usual daytime haunts, but he wasn’t in any of them.

“I looked under those shrubs, in that tree, and even on the balcony...”

“I wonder where he went...”

Initially startled by Tigger’s size, the servants had kept their distance from him. But as they lived together, they came to realize he had a gentle, not at all aggressive personality and that he had a sweet, adorable meow.

But what boosted his popularity the most was his relationship with Amy, so sweet and full of love. Unfortunately, however, he was so shy that none of the servants had gotten him to be affectionate with them, too.

They would look on fondly whenever Amy and Tigger—who were equally chubby and the same size—would cling to one another and romp around. In fact, being assigned to take care of Amy—and, by extension, Tigger—for the day was currently the most highly sought-after job among the servants.

“If you’re looking for Tigger, he’s in Lady Amy’s room.”

“Oh, Claude!” said the servant, taken aback by the man’s sudden appearance. “But he’s usually outside during the day...”

“Lady Amy’s absence has made him quite lonely, it seems.”

Smiling, the butler took the servant to Amy’s private chambers. When they arrived, the servant saw a bushy tail poking out from behind Amy’s favorite pillow on her small couch.

Much of his large body was visible as well, but it looked like he was trying to hide.

When the servant gently removed the pillow, Tigger—lying flat on his stomach and looking totally dejected—suddenly turned his face away from her.

They had a long, silent stand-off.

“He’s quite sulky today,” the butler finally said.

With a sidelong glance at the servant, who was struggling to contain herself over how cute Tigger was, Claude looked to the future and mused that whichever gentleman would one day become Amy’s husband had some stiff competition with this cat.



THAT evening, right after Amy and Isabelle had returned home from the riding grounds, Amy had rushed to her room. But when Claude had passed by the hallway, he saw Tigger sitting right *outside* the door to her bedroom, staring unwaveringly at the doorknob.

“Oh, Tigger!” he said in surprise. “I thought Lady Amy had come back... What is he doing out here?”

“Hello, Claude!” said the servant standing beside Tigger excitedly. “He’s waiting for Lady Amy. Apparently, she went on an unexpected trek through some thickets at the royal riding grounds today and tore her clothes, so she’s getting changed right now.”

“That’s right—Tigger’s a male cat, isn’t he? Waiting patiently for a lady to get ready is very important.”

“That’s true, but he’s also really excited for the dress she’s changing into!” she said, sounding close to laughter. Even as she petted Tigger, he stayed as meek as a lamb.

No one in the house could resist finding the cat cute, especially when Amy's presence in the house made him more amiable to all the servants. The young servant in the hallway was taking this precious opportunity to enjoy petting Tigger's fluffy fur.

Claude looked confused.

"A dress?"

"Yeah. Because she made him stay at home and he got lonely, Lady Amy said she was going to put on his favorite dress and—"

But her sentence was cut off by the bedroom door opening.

"Sorry for the wait, Tigger!" said Amy, waving the cat inside.

Just as Tigger, tired of waiting, was about to jump at her, he suddenly stopped in his tracks—his eyes were glued to the long ribbons dangling from the cuffs of her dress. They were designed to be wrapped around the wrists, but Amy kept them untied, so they hung to the floor.

Amy gestured and waved both hands exaggeratedly, as if she were conducting an invisible orchestra. With each motion, the long, thin ribbons swayed in the air.

Her dress was just like a cat toy.

Tigger kept his gaze fixed to the swaying ribbons and leaned forward, slowing his breath, swishing his tail, calculating his timing. Then suddenly, Amy stopped her arms right in front of her. Eyes glinting mischievously, she whispered, "Ready, set...GO!"

"...Oh, that explains it," observed Claude.

"He'll start playing with the ribbons when she's in the middle of putting the dress on, so he's banned from entering until after she's changed."

Tigger chased the ribbons attached to Amy, the human cat toy, and she skillfully dodged him. As she squealed and laughed, the room became filled with warmth and mirth. When Tigger did finally capture a ribbon, she would hold him close and pet him. Then they would break apart slightly, Amy would shake the ribbons, and they'd be at it again.

No matter how excited Tigger would get, he would never use his claws on Amy. She wouldn't have been able to play this game with him if she thought he would.

Claude thought it looked incredibly fun but also incredibly intense, and there weren't any breaks during the action. He would probably have desperately refused if asked to give it a try. Amy was already out of breath in just that short period of time.

"Ti-Tigger! Hold on, I need a little time-out! Oh... Come on, don't make that face... Oh, all right, just one more time, okay?"

With Amy so touched by Tigger's playful mood, there was no doubt they would be at the game for longer still.

"You're gonna make me lose weight like this!" Amy whined. The butler and servant met each other's eyes and nodded.

"...This seems like a good time for a drink," said Claude.

"All right. I'll bring some cold fruit water. And regular water for Tigger, too."

Amy and Tigger's play session was long and energetic. Unsurprisingly, Amy had more dishes than usual prepared for her for dinner that evening.

Chapter 6: Test Flight

EVERY time Amy saw the dresses lining her closet, the ones that softly flared out at the ends, she was reminded of the dress she had worn during the childhood coming-of-age festival in her past life.

At seven years old, Amy had picked out the bright mint-green dress herself. It had been beautiful, decorated with glittering rhinestones and with layer upon layer of organdy fabric stitched under the puffy skirt. She remembered how happy she'd been, feeling like a real princess...

Back in the present, Amy's mother Isabelle wasn't a fashionista *per se*, but she was reasonably attuned to the kingdom's fashion trends. She also felt a sense of duty about fashion as a noblewoman, so she made frequent use of seamstresses. Amy's full closet could be mostly attributed to this.

Ever since Amy began her mission to put on weight to avoid marrying the prince, her dresses started to be made from white or pale pastel fabrics—colors that had no slimming effects whatsoever.

She had one dress in the same shade of mint green as the one she had worn at that festival a lifetime ago... It was one of her favorites, of course.

Her wardrobe was a part of the desperate effort to make Amy appear even the slightest bit bigger. But recently, dresses of a slightly different type had been added to her collection...

There was, of course, her navy-blue riding dress. Amy had picked it out and it had been tailored for her to wear during her first visit to the royal riding grounds. But it was the riding dress hanging beside it—the one she wore just earlier that day—that was the problem.

It was an elegant wine-red color, which had a beautiful depth without feeling weighed down. Amy had nothing bad to say about the dye job, beautiful as could be expected from Maison, the seamstress to the royal family who

specialized in fabric dyeing. The shape of the dress was simple but also beautifully accented around the hem with embroidery; the golden thread matched Amy's eyes. There were no excessive frills, it was roomy enough to move in, and the dressmakers hadn't skimped out on the cloth they used—to put it simply, it was incredibly comfortable to wear.

But Amy continued to frown at it. Because earlier that day...

"That looks very good on you, Amy," the prince had said.

"Y-You think so?"

The truth was, Amy kind of thought it looked good on her, too. And she normally would have been thrilled at getting a compliment like that, but she had mixed emotions.

Amy's mother stood beside her, smiling as serenely as ever.

"It seems you have an eye for fashion, Your Highness! It's the perfect size, too."

Yes, it's shocking just how well it fit! Amy thought, fervently agreeing with her mother. *The color and brilliance of the pattern make me look thinner, too... The royal seamstress must be really talented!*

The only problem was...this incredibly wonderful dress had been a gift from Edward.

They were all standing together at the royal palace, Amy and her mother having been invited over, and it had been the first time in a while that she had seen Edward in person.

It was the day of Roodle's test to determine whether he could be reinstated as a messenger bird, and the test flight would be conducted in the presence of the prince.

Although the event had been ruled an accident because he had been swept away by the air currents, he had still drifted from the flight path and gotten injured. Moreover, he likely had been attacked by a magical beast. His injuries had healed, but they needed to make sure that he could still fly the distances required to deliver messages and that he wouldn't freeze in fear if he were to

cross paths with a magical beast or another bird.

“You didn’t have to go to all this trouble for an apology...” Amy said.

“But you only ruined your dress because I let you go with us,” Edward parried.

Amy hadn’t been hurt as they rushed through the forest to save Roodle, but her navy riding dress did get quite a few tears and frays from getting caught on the undergrowth and branches along the way. Not to mention, Amy had sat on the ground to perform healing magic, so her dress had gotten pretty dirty.

The new dress was given to her as both an apology and a thank-you gift for healing Roodle.

The story went that he had initially intended to give her two or three other dresses in addition to the riding dress, but she frantically refused them.

“It was only a little frayed! I patched it up right away. I even cleaned the dirt off and made it as good as new!”

“I still couldn’t just let you go on empty-handed! It was also a thank-you present for saving Roodle, remember? Or do you not like the dress? I probably should have had those other dresses made after all... Given you more options...,” Edward muttered to himself, shoulders slumping apologetically.

She felt even worse. Realizing that, although she had sent him a note of gratitude, she had not yet thanked him in person for the gift, Amy panicked.

“Th-That’s not it! I, uh... Thank you, Edward. It’s a very beautiful dress. It made me happy.”

“Really?” Edward smiled. “I’m glad to hear that!”

Roodle was perched atop the thick hide glove on Edward’s arm. Given the bird’s large size, he was quite heavy, which Amy knew personally from when she healed him. It made sense that his wings were so large—he needed them to maneuver his five-pound body around the sky.

Edward, looking composed, used his other hand for support and secured Roodle at midchest height to keep from shaking.

The bird looked comfortable, too, as he cheerfully chirped, bobbed his head, and looked around with his huge eyes.

Given that Edward had found and raised him, it was clear they had formed a relationship bound by mutual trust and that Roodle felt at home with him.

Amy lightly patted his head as she continued the conversation, his soft plumage feeling smooth against her bare fingers.

“Anyway, you got me lots of other stuff, too.”

“Yeah. They were just little things, though.”

To compensate for the other dresses Amy had refused, Edward had given her a complete set of accessories (matching hat, shoes, and gloves), along with her own riding equipment, prepared for her at the castle riding grounds, and an arm cover so she could hold birds. He couldn’t have told her “Come see the animals whenever you want!” any clearer without actually saying the words.

Amy had visited the castle frequently since receiving the gifts to check how Roodle was doing, but Edward had been so busy that she didn’t get the chance to see him and thank him properly—although she had been very graciously allowed to use the gifts even before she had done so.

Roodle’s injury had been completely healed by her healing magic, but Amy had not been able to breathe freely until the veterinarian had finally given a seal of approval that the bird’s injured wing would be ready to fly again. During that time, she had also become better friends with Marvin and Derek, the caretaker in charge of the messenger birds.

Amy had been told that she was allowed to visit whenever she wanted, no appointment needed. Whenever she went, she was always given a warm, unpretentious welcome, and she sometimes even brought Tigger along with her. The first couple of times she brought her cat, he had been so shy that he never once strayed from her side. His head bobbed and weaved cutely as he looked around, interested in the horses and birds.

The royal birds had been trained to come at a whistle, but they were essentially allowed free range in their large enclosure and the outskirts of the forest beside it. They didn’t seem to be able to sense that Amy was coming if she was hidden from sight, but as soon as she’d get into hearing distance, Roodle would fly out to her without even being called.

His full wingspan looked to be about five feet, easily longer than Amy was tall. But despite his large size, like a true bird of prey, his wings were virtually silent in flight. She would never notice him approaching her until he had practically reached her already.

He was undeniably smart, too. Although he probably wasn't as sharp as a cat or a dog, he seemed to understand what she would say, and they shared some simple communication. That intelligence was likely part of the reason he'd become a royal messenger bird.

To teach a messenger bird how to deliver letters, you had to first clearly show them the flight path. The caretaker Derek had been very excited to teach her how to do this. All you had to do, he explained, was place stones imbued with magic along the route for the birds to follow—although they could be placed several miles apart. The birds would use them as a guide, and it would only take a few round trips for them to memorize the route.

Amy was strongly reminded of the bird and the bread crumbs in Hansel and Gretel.

In her previous life, she only knew of owls acting as carrier pigeons in fantasy novels. She'd never actually heard of it happening in real life. She also remembered stories of owners training birds to return to them after going out hunting, but never of someone telling them to go somewhere, deliver something, and then return home.

This world was very similar to her old world in many respects, but some of the details were a little different. The animals were somehow smarter and even behaved a little differently.

But then...this is a world where magical beasts are commonplace. Of course it would be different.

It hadn't been all that long since Amy had remembered the memories of her past life. She couldn't help feeling like she had one foot in both worlds.

But her family, who were basically masters of being reincarnated at this point, had given her some advice. Amy would gradually get used to this way of life, so she shouldn't force herself to dwell on the past...but neither should she put pressure on herself to forget it entirely.

...I'm so glad we all were reincarnated together.

The characters from the books she used to read almost always were reincarnated alone. In the rare case there was someone else, it was usually their rival or a character totally unrelated to them, so there was practically no one they could ask for help.

Regular life is confusing and distressing enough... I can't imagine how lonely it would feel, being burdened with something as big as your own cosmic past, without having someone to talk to...

If Amy had been alone, with no real-life experience and memories only up until high school, she might have spiraled into a very dark place...

Everyone in the Northland family had remembered their past lives at around ten years old. Her mother had remembered under very cliché circumstances—she was with the man she'd been arranged to marry. She didn't faint, like Amy did, but she started acting very strange and had requested they defer the engagement. While all that was going on, she happened to meet Amy's father in this world. Which ended up being good timing, Isabelle added with a laugh.

"But your father's realization was the best! He was disassembling a magical tool for fun, and then he suddenly remembered: *This is a cog, not a circuit board!*"

Amy and Harold had roared with laughter. They couldn't imagine a more fitting story for their father.

Although it wasn't a circuit board, their father *had* been working on something modern. After Isabelle's many pleas, he had started trying to create a camera. Amy was almost as excited about it as her mother.

Quite a while after her parents had met, when the earl and countess had looked at their children, they had a hunch they were reincarnations, too. Their faces looked different, but there was just *something* about them that was eerily similar. Not that they were very concerned either way, of course. They loved their children, reincarnated or not, and nothing else mattered to them.

I'm not sure if being reincarnated makes things more peaceful or more chaotic... But sometimes it certainly comes in handy, Amy mused,

absentmindedly brushing her fingers against the spot on Roodle's hip that had been injured.

His stomach, with its white, fluffy, densely packed plumage, looked just like a cotton ball. There was only one spot where the feathers had been ripped off, exposing skin, although that was quickly being covered by downy, new feathers.

As she touched the now-invisible scars, Roodle tickled the back of her hand with his beak as if he were saying, "It doesn't hurt anymore!"

"It looks like you're all fixed up now, Roodle. I'm so glad!" she exclaimed.

"It's all thanks to you, Amy," Edward said. "If any more time had passed, that injury would have been very hard to heal. If you hadn't been there—if you hadn't healed him with your magic—he might never have flown again."

"It's because you were so strong and managed to fly almost all the way home," she said to Roodle. "You're very impressive!"

The bird hooted happily, and Amy became even more convinced he understood human words.

"Roodle likes being petted here, too."

"On his forehead? All right, then..." Amy rubbed the middle of his forehead with a few fingers. The feathers were soft and light, but his head was rock-solid just below them.

His head bobbed, eyes half-closed, and he leaned forward, practically shouting, "More forehead pets, please!"

"Your face is just too cute...!"

"A lot of birds don't like being petted," commented Edward.

"But you do, don't you, Roodle? And I'm glad you do, because that means I get to pet you!"

The world around them seemed to take on a rose-colored tint as the adorable, chubby girl stared at the white owl with a dreamy expression. Edward, Amy, and Roodle looked so sweet together, Marvin could almost smell sugar in the air.

He cleared his throat with a cough.

“Your Highness, Lady Amy. As much as I hate intruding on this delightful scene, it’s about time we got going.”

“Ah! You’re right,” said Edward. “I’m sure they’re waiting for us. Let’s get started.”

I-Intruding?! Y-You’re not intruding on anything! You’ve got it all wrong!

Then, with Amy blushing and her mind circling on that casually uttered word, they proceeded to set up Roodle’s flight test.

There were more caretakers around than usual today. She could also see several officials, who presumably had come down to observe.

Amy was able to hold it together around so many people because she was so close to Marvin, Roodle, and the horses, but if she had been all alone, she would definitely have slunk away from the crowds. She almost felt as if *she* were being observed, too, which always made her feel on edge.

Edward smiled at her reassuringly.

“Shall we go, then?”

“Yes. Good luck, Roodle. Derek will be waiting for you at the delivery destination.”

Amy gave his forehead one more pat for support.

Even if he couldn’t manage being a messenger anymore, Roodle would always be a special bird. But even if he could hunt his own food, you couldn’t just return a hand-raised bird to nature. And although, as a bird of the royal palace, he had been officially allowed to fly long distances, safety precautions were only taken for active messenger birds.

Retirees continued to live at the royal palace and weren’t neglected. However, they had fewer opportunities to fly long distances, and if they went out on their own and didn’t return, a search might not even be conducted for them.

Messenger birds have a set time frame for retirement to reduce the burden on any one bird. Roodle still had a little way to go until his retirement... Until

that day came, Amy hoped he could stay here and continue to fly as much as he wanted with peace of mind.

Edward entered with Marvin onto the stage they had set up for the test. Two guards followed at a slight distance, flanking them. One of the guards was Darios. Seeing the worried look on Amy's face, he gave her a nod. She felt a little more at ease after that.

Marvin looked over the observers and began the opening statement.

"We will now be conducting the messenger bird Roodle's flight test. The pass criteria are as follows: the bird being tested shall arrive at the destination, receive a stamp on the letter, and return to this spot within the time limit. The time limit is thirty minutes. The destination is the Northland manor in the nearby castle town. The time starts...now."

At the signal, Edward lifted his arm. Roodle lunged off it and spread his wings.

The bird soared high into the air and then stopped for a split second, as if to show the observers the small cylinder tied to his leg that held the letter. Then, in the blink of an eye, he became a black speck against the sky.

Cheers of praise rang throughout the grounds at his swiftness and the absence of any lingering ill effects of the injury.

The destination—the Northland manor—was Amy's home in the royal capital. Edward had suggested it.

"It's the perfect distance away for the flying test," he had assured her. "Plus, if he memorizes the way to your house, Roodle can take you my letters, right?"

And that's how the test destination was decided.

Amy had asked him why he wanted to send her letters all of a sudden. He explained that he'd be attending school and living in the school's dormitories next year.

"Don't you write letters to friends you don't get to see very often?" he had asked so innocently.

And just like that, she had no reason to refuse.

But I had really only planned on being his friend until he started going to

school... Friends with an expiration date...

The otome game was still in her mind, of course, and it naturally made her uneasy about continuing to associate with the prince. But it wasn't all bad—because she had said yes, she was able to see how birds train to memorize flight paths, and when Roodle flew to the Northland house days before on a practice run, he had been able to play with Tigger, who had been in the garden at just the right time.

Although the cat had initially been surprised at the snowy owl's sudden appearance, he didn't look scared—perhaps because he had seen him before at the royal palace. It even seemed like they were becoming two birds—two animals—of a feather.

Amy's and Isabelle's eyes were glued to the interaction, watching how they slowly and imperceptibly got closer and closer to one another, until eventually, they started poking each other curiously. Amy was really pleased at that.

As long as it's just letters, I'm sure it'll be fine...probably.

The butler Claude, an administrative official from the royal palace, and Derek were all waiting for Roodle at the Northlands' house.

Amy, proud and impressed with how the bird flew with such confidence, watched him in the sky until he disappeared from view.

It'll be fine... Roodle will pass, no question about it!

Amy, Edward, and Marvin exchanged confident smiles.



ROODLE passed his test flight with flying colors and was reinstated as a messenger bird. From that day, the clever, talented owl began carrying letters between the Third Prince and Amy, not only when she stayed at the Northland manor but even when she visited her grandfather's home in the distant border province by the sea.

Intermission: Tigger and Roodle

“...**AND** that’s how they follow the magical power contained in these stones, using them as a kind of guide,” the royal caretaker Derek explained to Amy and Isabelle in their garden. It had just been decided that the Northland house would be the destination for Roodle’s flight test, and Derek was in the middle of teaching the bird the flight path.

He gave Amy one of the stones, which was emitting a strange magical power, to hold and smiled at her fondly. Derek had originally been a commoner from the countryside, but one day the royal palace, impressed by his talent in animal husbandry, had offered him employment. Amy reminded him of his own niece, who was around the same age, living back in his hometown.

“He also memorizes a person’s face and will almost always seek out that person whenever he arrives at the destination. I wanted to ask you to be that person for the Northland house, Lady Amy, because he’s the most used to you.”

Amy nodded, gazing at the stone in her hand. Roughly the size of a small rice ball, the stone faintly glowed red. Practically every other magical stone she had seen had been inside a magical tool, and they were usually much smaller and darker in color.

“When I was a child, hawks usually delivered letters to us,” Isabelle commented. She had often seen them flying back and forth from the royal capital to her home in the border province.

“Really? I haven’t seen any messenger birds at Grandfather’s house,” Amy said.

“You probably just missed them. They’re still delivering messages to this day—they’re much faster than the postal service, you see... Oh, look! There he is!”

As they stared at the clear, blue sky, a solitary black speck ever so silently became larger and larger. They shouted in support and amazement, and Roodle started circling right above Amy and the magical stone in her hands.

“I can’t believe it! He really made it!”

Having already put the arm cover on her left arm, she held it out. Roodle immediately perched on the landing spot. Amy just managed to keep her legs from buckling from the sudden weight on her arm—thanks to Tigger and Isabelle bracing her feet and shoulders, respectively.

“Roodle! You didn’t lose your way at all! Great job!”

Seeing Roodle’s head bobbing happily, Amy vaguely wondered if he was happy about the compliment or the food as he gobbled up the treats in Derek’s hand with relish.

Amy took out the scrap of paper from the cylinder on Roodle’s leg and saw Marvin’s signature and Roodle’s departure time. Her mother had been right—messenger birds were *much* faster than someone delivering a letter on horseback, even if they rode at full speed.

When he had finished eating, Roodle spread his wings and flew to the branch of a nearby tree, landing with a light *thud*. He would take a short rest before his return flight to the royal palace.

The tree Roodle had landed on happened to be Tigger’s favorite oak tree. The cat sprinted over to his perceived territory with surprising speed for his size.

“Wait! Tigger!” Amy cried. “Shoot, he ran off... I really hope he doesn’t pick a fight...”

“It’s not like Roodle’s a stranger. They’ve met several times before,” Isabelle reasoned. “I’m sure they’ll be fine. See?”

After the pursuit, Tigger and Roodle were standing some distance apart on the same branch halfway up the oak tree, Tigger right beside the trunk and Roodle at the end of the branch. For a while they were motionless, throwing furtive glances at each other.

Despite Amy’s mounting anxiety, the standoff between the two massive animals was quite an impressive sight.

Then, amazingly, Roodle began to inch his way toward Tigger. He would take one step forward—then pause. After a short while, he would take another step

—

Eventually, the two animals were perfectly nestled up next to each other.

“They seem to get along well, don’t they?” Derek observed.

Halfway through Amy’s sigh of relief, there was a sudden movement in the tree.

Roodle pecked at Tigger’s fluffy front paw with his beak.

Tigger’s tail swished. Then, as if in retaliation, he took his front paw and bonked Roodle’s fluffy stomach.

Peck. Bonk.

Peck. Bonk.

Peck...

“Oh my god, what *is* that?!” Amy asked excitedly. “What are they *doing*?!”

“Wait—I need a video of this! A camera! *Ugh*, why don’t we have one yet?!” agonized Isabelle.

Cat and owl communicated with almost no eye contact at all. The young noble lady openly anguished over their cuteness, her face beet-red. The lady’s mother stamped her foot and cursed the absence of a so-called “ca-mer-ah.” Watching all the chaos, the royal caretaker was moved by the stark reminder that not all aristocrats were always so demure and stuffy.

In other words, it was another peaceful day at the Northland house.

Chapter 7: At the Border Province

DEAR Ed,

How are you?

It's already been ten days since I arrived at my grandfather's house. Tigger's gotten pretty used to everything here—there are fewer and fewer new places for him to explore in the house. But there's still so much for us to discover when we go outside for a walk every day.

Our favorite place right now is the rocky coast by the sea. There are these tiny fish and sea anemones that live in the tidepools there, and Tigger tries to catch them, but he hasn't been able to yet. He looks into the pools with such intense concentration, and he tries his best, but the fish are really good at swimming away.

He was a little scared of going up to the water's edge at first, but he's fine with it now. Cats are supposed to hate getting wet, but it doesn't seem to bother Tigger—he bats his front paws at the waves. He was doing it yesterday, too, but then a huge wave suddenly crashed right into us! Yes... We both had to walk back to the house sopping wet...

My mother just laughed and said, "You're already wet—why not just go for a swim?"

Tigger was really shocked that the seawater was salty. He made such a funny face when he tried licking himself clean! Don't worry, though. We went inside right away and washed it all off.

I found another pretty seashell, though. I put it in my glass bottle. I'll collect a lot of them to show you when I get back to the royal capital.

My father hasn't been able to come yet, but my brother and my magic teacher should be arriving shortly, so things should be getting a little less boring soon!

You told me in your last letter that you hoped I'd write more casually, so I tried

to tone things down in this letter. Is this casual? It probably just sounds weird, doesn't it?

Sincerely,

Amy



AMY Northland folded and rolled up her letter, written on slightly thinner paper than usual, stuffed it securely into the cylinder tied to Roodle's leg, and fastened the cylinder's cap.

Roodle had finished eating and resting and was practically bouncing with excitement to fly again. Amy gave him a thank-you forehead scratch. The bird hooted in response and swiftly took off.

"Ah... Another beautiful day for flying."

From the second-story veranda, Amy watched Roodle as he seemed to shrink smaller and smaller, finally getting swallowed up by the blue skies around him. Tigger sat beside Amy, watching the sky, too.

"Well, Tigger, Harold should be getting here any moment now. Shall we go outside?"

The cat squeaked out a meow and followed Amy out of the room.

Amy and Isabelle were staying in the scenic, bustling seaside town of Wallum, which was governed by Amy's grandfather, the Margrave of Wallum.

Ever since Amy was little, they had come to her mother's hometown once a year, usually for about two months, although sometimes they ended up staying for three or more. Amy looked forward to the trip every year.

With seas to its northern and western borders and a massive roadway connecting the major inland areas, the Kingdom of Luducia was often in contact with other kingdoms and was an international trade hub. They also had flourishing agriculture and processing industries, but trade was the cornerstone of their economy.

That was largely the reason why the royal family had married most of their children off to nobles from foreign kingdoms for many generations. Even Prince

Edward's two older brothers were arranged to marry royalty from allied kingdoms.

Maritime trade held considerable influence and leverage among the international trade routes, and Wallum was one of the vital seaside cities in Luducia. Although it was located in a remote region, Wallum had one of the highest populations in the kingdom and was overseen by Isabelle's father, Rudolf.

However, the people of Wallum were very different from the citizens of the royal capital. They were incredibly open and unreserved, with almost no perceptible differences between the nobles and the commoners.

Storms occurred seasonally every year, and in the past, there had been several huge disasters. Given its location, many seamen and merchants from foreign kingdoms made their homes in Wallum, and there was simply no time to fret over titles or nationalities each time a disaster occurred.

These circumstances—paired with the unconventionally forthright and rough personality of its feudal lord—made Wallum an unpretentious, lively gateway to trade in the region.

The margrave's estate was built on a cliff by the sea. At the highest point on the grounds was a tower with a light at the very top, which could function as a lighthouse when needed.

Wallum had its own private, small army both for defense and to assist during natural disasters. Lodgings and facilities for it were located on the adjacent plot, where they also conducted exercises, but the margrave's estate was frequently used for meetings and briefing sessions.

As Amy was going down the stairs, her grandfather and some of his commanding officers were just coming out of one of the meeting rooms, right beside the grand house's exit.

"Oh, Amy! Heading outside?" her grandfather asked brightly.

"Yes, Grandpa. Harold and everyone from his school are about to arrive any moment—"

Amy had assumed he was merely walking up to her, but then he suddenly

grabbed both of her arms. One second she was standing on the floor—the next, she was hoisted above his head.

Amy couldn't tell whether his hair was silver-blond or just gray, but his short hair was very shiny. His skin was tanned and weathered, hardened by the sea air and sun. Despite his advanced age, his body was strong, and his rolled-up sleeves revealed scars from a lifetime of battles. He looked quite frightening and could easily pass as the captain of a pirate ship, but to Amy, he was just Grandpa.

Although he was very similar to Marvin physically, they had very different personalities—where Marvin was all subdued teasing and politeness, her grandfather was bombastic and direct.

“Grandpa! I-I’m not a little kid anymo— Ahhh!”

“Bahaha! Oh, don’t say that!”

Amy was much heavier than she ever had been before, but he still managed to hoist and twirl her around with ease.

Rudolf, who doted on his granddaughter, was just happy to have Amy’s arms around him, dizzy and frazzled though she may be. One of the soldiers looked taken aback by the show of affection, but many other subordinates, including some commanding officers, looked on with smiles on their faces, as if this happened all the time.

It was true that the feudal lord was as fierce as a demon in times of crisis, but he was just a regular old man in front of his grandchildren.

“G-Grandpa! Aren’t your arms tired?”

“I would be able to carry you even if you were ten times heavier! You used to be so skinny I’d worry about you blowing away in the wind!”

“I told you last time, I won’t be blown away!”

When he finally put her down, Amy wobbled over to Tigger and hugged him. She dearly loved her grandfather, and she usually loved running into him randomly like that, but it was very nauseating getting suddenly and quickly spun around. Amy was very grateful she hadn’t just eaten.

“Oh, Tigger... Your fluffiness is so soothing...”

Just as she buried her face in the cat’s neck, her grandfather noticed a commotion outside. Harold and the others had arrived.

“Harold’s carriage is here. Are you two coming, too?”

“Yeah! The wait is over, Tigger!”

And with that, everyone finally filed outside.

Every year, students from the Royal Academy came to this town as part of a special field trip. They came to get hands-on experience with their chosen field of study, be it international trade, ship making, navigation and steering, or foreign languages. Many of the sons of high-ranking nobles visited to study territorial governance or disaster preparedness. Welcoming these students was one part of the margrave’s job.

Any student who wanted to, regardless of their rank in society, could come study in Wallum as long as they passed their exams. The cost depended on the length of their stay, but participation was pretty cheap, so many students came every year.

Amy didn’t know any of the students personally in the prior years, but this year was a little different. This year Harold was visiting Wallum not as the margrave’s grandson but as one of the students on a field trip.

Carriages bearing students had already pulled up as the welcoming party fanned out onto the wide front lawn of the estate. Harold, barely able to contain his impatience, got off the first carriage.

“WOO-HOO! Here we are!”

“Hal, take it down a notch...”

“That’s not a very warm welcome, dear sister! And after all the injuries I suffered to help you get Tigger...”

“That has nothing to do with anything! And you shouldn’t have been so reckless, anyway!”

“I know, I know. Mother’s scolding is much worse than any magical beast... Right, Tigger?” he added, reaching out to pet him.

Tigger deftly avoided his hand. Harold had only stayed at the Northland house on the occasional weekend, so the cat hadn't yet acknowledged him as part of the family.

Harold was soberly stunned at Tigger's aversion, but he had no time to prolong his heartbreak over it—a terrifying laugh rang out from behind his back.

"What was that you were saying about me again?"

Both siblings jumped. It was like their mother had appeared out of thin air. Isabelle crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at Harold, who turned around and immediately apologized.

"I come all the way out here to welcome you, just to hear you speaking so rudely of your mother. I came to tell you a kraken has appeared, but I'm sure you'd rather stay home, wouldn't you, Hal?"

"What?! Wait—that's not true! I came all the way here to test my skills!"

Currents from the open ocean flowed into the Sea of Wallum, so fishing was a thriving industry in Wallum. Trade was paramount, though, so large fishing vessels were prohibited; a sizeable chunk of the population went out on small boats instead. But both small fishing boats and large merchant vessels shared a common grievance—aquatic magical beasts. And wherever you found magical beasts, whether in the ocean, on land, or deep in dungeons, you were sure to also find a type of adventurer called hunters.

Harold came here this year as part of a hunter field trip.

Amy glanced at her brother, still pleading with Isabelle, then looked around. Her grandfather and the teacher chaperones were introducing the students filing out of the carriages to their mentors in Wallum. They were explaining the standard order of business, like if anything happened to them, they could always come to Margrave Wallum, and that the teachers would be periodically dropping in during the students' practicums. The students listened with excited faces, nodding along, before dispersing to the places where they were staying.

After a while, all the students had left, and only two students besides Harold remained. These three were the only ones who came here as hunters, whose lodgings were the barracks on the adjacent plot of land.

Amy knew the two other students because Harold had often brought them over to the Northland house. They were kind, unassuming identical twin brothers, Gilbert and Nicholas.

“A kraken, huh? I wonder what size it is. What do you think, Gil?”

“I hope it’s a big one, anyhow,” Gil said. Even their voices sounded the same. “Those are the ones really worth hunting. But I heard they’ll let us join up with the Frontier Army Hunting Unit. Right, Harold?”

Harold had finally escaped from Isabelle’s scolding and joined in on the conversation.

“That’s right. I heard we’ll be heading out first thing tomorrow. You too, Amy. You’ll wait on the beach on standby in case we need healing.”

Amy’s eyebrows shot up.

“Wait—are you serious? I mean, I guess that’s fine, but...please don’t get hurt if you don’t have to.”

This was the first she was hearing of this, but if they thought her healing magic would help, she didn’t see a reason to refuse. She nodded.

“Your healing magic is really good—it doesn’t hurt at all,” Nick said.

“Yeah, you’re even better than the doctors at school,” added Gil. “You’d be a big help.”

As Gil and Nick took turns giving her a pat on the head and thanking her for helping them out, Tigger, who was practically glued to her ankles, tapped her with his tail. He seemed to be getting bored.

Now that the reception was over, Amy wondered if they could go on a walk before the sun set. But before she finished her thought, she suddenly felt like someone was looking at her.

Amy twitched in surprise and slowly turned her eyes to where Tigger was looking.

Huh...?

In front of the estate was a road lined with trees. Someone was standing in

the shade of those trees, looking at her.

Then, perhaps noticing that Amy and Tigger were looking back, they spun around and ran off.

“Hm? Is something wrong, Amy?”

“Oh— No, it’s nothing... Probably.”

I wonder why they were there... My heart’s beating so fast...

She couldn’t see their face because they were so far away, but Amy was pretty sure it was a girl around the same age as her (judging by her height), wearing a plain dress.

“She had such beautiful pink blonde hair...”

She had clearly seen the girl’s long hair, down to her back, fluttering in the wind...

That was the hair color of a *heroine*.



AMY had intended on going down to the beach for a leisurely stroll, but she ended up turning around and heading back inside.

In her room, sitting at her vanity, her fist clenched over her erratically beating heart. She let out a deep breath and stared at herself in the mirror. The weight she had recently put on had altered her appearance a little, but her naturally chilly, sharp features were still visible. Not to mention, of course, her golden eyes and dark straight hair...

She grabbed some of this hair with a chubby hand.

“I can’t delude myself anymore—I’m the villainess.”

Pink blonde. That was how the heroine’s hair was often described in the villainess-style novels Amy used to read. All she needed was blue or green eyes to check all the boxes.

The heroine would start out as a commoner. But then she’d get adopted by an aristocrat because of her incredible magical prowess or something like that, and then it would later be revealed that she was actually their long-lost

daughter or granddaughter! The cliché was so overdone that Amy didn't find it strange that the girl had been standing there in commoner's clothing.

But...

Amy shook her head.

Everyone in town knew that the students were going to arrive today. People come to watch them arrive every year. She might have just been passing by as I looked up.

Isabelle would take every opportunity to tell her that her life here had nothing to do with the games and stories in her head, but Amy just couldn't totally convince herself of that yet. Not when Harold, Edward, and Alexander were irrefutable carbon copies of the illustrations of the characters in that game.

Not only that, but Amy was born with a naturally high magical aptitude and was a noblewoman in the running to become engaged to a prince. These were common features of villainess characters. Incidentally, because the prince had not yet officially decided on a fiancée, Amy was still considered a candidate.

Amy thought she and Edward had developed a good relationship as friends over their conversations about animals. As things were now, Edward had already started conducting official business as the Third Prince and was also limited in what he could do in his free time, so they had mostly been exchanging letters instead of meeting in person.

She hadn't had much contact with Alexander, either, but she would sometimes meet him when she'd take Tigger to the duke's estate to play. He'd offer her sweets and they'd spend time together in their private, pretend cat café, just like they always did.

Far from when he had first accosted her with his condescending attitude, Amy now felt like she had gained another older brother. They talked to each other so comfortably, she was sure he didn't harbor any hatred or revulsion toward her.

There was also her brother, Harold, potentially the secret character from the game...

Amy hadn't broken off contact with the suspected love interests of the game, but her relationships with them were actually pretty good. As long as she

looked at only her objective reality, there was no reason for her to feel anxious or uneasy. The problem was that she couldn't shake off her lingering worries...

Her shadow stretched under the setting sun streaming in through the window. She had been sitting at her vanity for quite some time. Tigger put his front paws on her lap, trying to get her attention.

"Oh, Tigger! I'm sorry. You wanted to play in the waves, didn't you?"

When Amy put her arms around the cat's neck and hugged him, he nuzzled his fluffy head against her cheek.

She tried focusing on her objective reality.

Tigger's soft fur. His alert ears. His twitching whiskers. His warm body. The weight of his paws on her lap...

Tears began to spill out of Amy's eyes.

"Tigger... What should I do?"

She couldn't help it—she was terrified.

There were a few terrifying "family downfall" tropes that she remembered, but what scared her more than anything else was the thought of the people around her suddenly changing because of the "invisible hand of the game."

The people she considered her friends—even her family—might one day do an about-face and turn their backs on her. And if their hearts could be changed by an outside force, would all of this have been for nothing?

Amy was so scared she couldn't stop crying.

She sobbed to herself, trying in vain to catch her breath. Then something large, rough, and damp rubbed against her cheek.

"Huh?"

She felt it again.

"Tigger..."

She blinked in surprise. Tigger was licking away her tears. Carefully, he licked at her other cheek, too.

Tigger's sandpaper tongue was slightly painful against her skin. But Amy didn't push him away—being licked by a cat is an act of love.

They lick when they're grooming their babies, when they're doting on something, when they're concerned and giving comfort...

Humans have thin skin around their eyes, after all, so it really did start to hurt a little. But Amy could see herself reflected in Tigger's gold eyes, and she laughed despite her puffy, red eyes.

“...Thank you, Tigger. I love you so much.”

Pain is an unmistakable reminder of reality.

She didn't know what the future would hold, but the present was here and now, with Amy and Tigger together.

Amy suddenly lapsed into silence as she realized...*her fear came from her lack of confidence.*

She was ashamed at her own weakness, at a single glimpse of pink blonde hair sending her into such distress. One person having pink blonde hair didn't make anything final.

What had she seen and heard with her own eyes and ears so far?

She had always been so frightened of the thought that it *might* be the world from her otome game, she had only been able to halfheartedly accept anything else—her mother's insistence that it wasn't true, the genuine feelings of her family, the behavior of Edward and Alexander...

Under all those circumstances, it would be absurd to make assumptions or predictions about the future.

“All right... I'll try to keep my chin up, Tigger.”

I want to get stronger.

She wanted to come to grips with this world and live her life to the fullest in the present.

But to do that, Amy first had to shape up.

Because whether it was an otome game or not, anything she could objectively

feel was her personal reality.

Amy recalled her mother's words again.

"So, Amy... What do you want to do?"

I want a cat. I want a bird and a dog, too... I want animals.

Because that had been the dream from her previous life, which she had never been able to fulfill.

And what about her life now? Was she really all right using this life just to satisfy every regret from the last one?

What did Amy—not her previous self—want to do?

"I..."

A torrent of questions flooded her mind.

Just what am I? Why am I here, living again? Why do I have these memories of my previous life?

But she was sure her mother would just laugh at her and say, "What are you getting so worked up about? Surely you don't need a reason for being alive or for wanting to be happy, do you?"

Amy's tears had stopped. She snuggled her cheeks against Tigger and hugged him tightly.

Fluffy...warm...soft... His sweet voice. His shyness. His tail. Amy loved everything about him.

Her thoughts spun in circles, but they always came back to the same places. Her previous life. Villainesses. Bad endings. Reverse harems.

I'd rather have a cat!



WITH her heart thus decided, the switch was quick. If Hannah were there and knew what had happened, she would think, *Like mother, like daughter...*

I want animals—that was Amy's greatest desire, and she wouldn't make it play second fiddle to anything else anymore.

Amy had changed her body to sabotage her chances of being the prince's fiancée. But in the end, she still maintained a friendship with the prince, and Edward didn't seem to be the type who cared what weight his friends were.

It was a bit of a letdown, but in the unlikely event she became his fiancée, she was sure the civil officials and the other aristocrats would loudly voice their opposition to it. But even if the prince weren't involved, Amy didn't want to return to being skinnier than a stick.

"I mean...my magical power is a lot more stable the way I am now, isn't it?" Amy asked Tigger.

She was still sitting in front of the vanity, hugging the cat. One arm still wrapped around him, she stretched the other out in front of her.

When she turned her palm upward and started imbuing her hand with magic, small droplets—almost like a fine mist—started to gather and faintly glow over her palm. The next moment, they softly swirled and circled into a ball the color of the sun.

As Amy held it out in front of Tigger, he watched it with sparkling eyes. She smiled.

"We missed our chance to go to the beach today because of me, so let's play with this!"

Amy tossed the ball toward a corner of the room with a playful shout, and Tigger dashed nimbly after it.

The ball of light landed with a *plop* on the rug, then started scuttling around the floor like a mouse, winding under the bed, flitting in and out of the curtains, darting behind the chest...

The glowing ball moved here and there at the direction of Amy's fingertips, its speed oscillating between slow and fast. The afterimage left from the light resembled a tail, making it really look like some sort of living creature.

Amy's magic teacher—Professor Pop-Pop (Sir Dion)—was the one who taught Amy how to create the photosphere, but the first time he had seen her playing with it like this, he had been rendered speechless.

When it finally dawned on him that she really had been using the photosphere as a cat toy, though, he had roared with laughter. Her creativity and playfulness were some of the things he liked most about her.

Just creating a photosphere was possible for a ten-year-old like Amy. But the magic power required to sustain it—and further, to control it with ease—was difficult to generate for bodies that were still growing. You needed a sturdy body to amass more magic power.

Healing and purification magic both consumed a fair amount of magic power, too.

Her father, who had the same predisposition to allergies as Amy, had one day mentioned how his nose itched when he was around Tigger when he was being brushed. This was luckily a false positive—not an actual allergic reaction, but memories of his past life making him feel like he had an itchy nose. But even so, in a world with few doctors, Amy thought it would be incredibly useful to be able to cure slight maladies on her own.

Then she could help the servants when they got colds, or the seemingly never-ending injuries on Harold. She also wanted to be able to heal animals like Roodle with magic whenever it was needed.

Amy's healing magic had a reputation among the servants for being particularly effective.

"Things might be different when I'm older, but right now I need my body like this... Tigger—take that!" she said, redirecting the ball.

At long last, Tigger finally caught the photosphere under his front paw. The sun-colored light fizzled out. Tigger looked up at Amy with a mixture of satisfaction and regret.

Amy ran up to him and gave him a tight hug.

"You got it, Tigger! You're so good at this game!"

"...Well now, they really are two peas in a pod..."

Isabelle, curious about the strange sounds coming from Amy's room, had peeked inside. She smiled warmly at the charming scene.

Amy and Tigger were holding each other, but she wasn't petting or fawning over him... No, they were rolling around the floor as they clung to each other, Amy squealing and giggling with pure delight.

Chapter 8: Slaying the Kraken

ON maps of the area, the coast of Wallum formed a gentle curve. Berths were maintained in the bays dotted along the coast for docking ships, and there were port offices located on each stretch of shoreline to handle a wide range of logistical procedures, including customs procedures for merchant ships coming from other kingdoms and for facilitating the buying and selling of fish caught in the Sea of Wallum.

The port offices at the bay nearest to the margrave's estate also acted as the town's central business hub. The sturdy, stone office building faced a public square lined with street stalls and food carts and was filled with people, offering a scenic representation of the bustling port town.

The day before, the port offices had received word that a kraken had made its way into the bay from the open ocean. They were fortunate there had so far only been eyewitness reports and no material damage yet, but they still had to act—krakens had a habit of attacking ships.

So they quickly prepared a boat that acted both as an observation vessel and as a hunting ship, and the student hunters who had just arrived were sent along with the members of the Hunting Unit.

"I wonder if Harold and the others are okay...", Amy fretted.

"Your grandfather went, too, so Harold will be just fine. Besides, even if fighting in the ocean has its challenges, the magical beasts in dungeons are much harder to beat."

"But Hal fights best in the air, doesn't he? Won't he be at a disadvantage in the water?"

"If he can't manage to beat a monster like that, he'll have to retire as a hunter in shame! Hal's just got to show us what he's made of."

There had been no aquatic beast sightings when Amy visited last year, so she

was a ball of worry. Isabelle, by contrast, was born and raised in Wallum and had seen aquatic beasts so often she had just accepted them as a part of everyday life. She didn't seem concerned at all.

Beside the port office was a restaurant with an open-air terrace facing the bay, a section of which was currently being used by the Hunting Unit as a temporary base of operations. Commanding officers from the Wallum army, personnel from the port office, and some of the professors from the school were all huddled together, looking very busy as they communicated with the ship via magical tools.

Amy, Isabelle, and Tigger were sitting at the terrace, too, albeit slightly at a distance. Underneath a large umbrella, they watched as the ship Harold had boarded headed farther out to sea.

Amy felt a little self-conscious, as she was sure they just looked like a family taking a cat to a resort and having a little tea party, but no matter how worried she was, they would only have gotten in the way if they hovered around the others.

"Besides, the kraken might not even come out today," her mother continued. "They just sent out the boats to show they're ready and watching. There's really nothing to worry about."

Ever since they had received eyewitness reports of the kraken, the port authorities had instructed merchant vessels to avoid the area and use the docks some distance away. Because of that, there were no large ships out today, although there was a smattering of small fishing boats out at sea. Sea monster or not, the citizens of Wallum wouldn't change their daily routines.

"And anyway, don't you think the kraken would be a little cautious, having been seen? You'd think it'd be smarter than to jump out at the first opportunity —"

Just as Isabelle lifted her glass of cold fruit water, the magical communicators blared out a piercing emergency signal.

"THE KRAKEN HAS APPEARED!"

The headquarters immediately flew into a flurry of activity.

Amy quickly turned her gaze to the ocean and saw her brother's boat—which had become quite small in the distance—and something large wriggling beside it.

She couldn't make out the chaotic voices coming from the magical device, but she could tell even from land that the crewmates on the boat, which was now forcefully shaking left and right, were clamoring in an uproar.

Startled by the sudden chaos, Tigger glued himself to Amy's feet under the table.

"Mom...! You said it wouldn't come out today!"

"Well, now that I think about it...Hal always did have good luck!"

Amy nearly fell over in her seat in exasperation as her mother waved her hand and yelled, "Give it all you got, Harold!"

But, Amy remembered, I suppose it's true that I haven't actually seen a kraken in real life...and Grandpa has slain them many times before...

It was just another job for the members of the Hunting Unit, and they *had* surely faced dangers like this on a daily basis... Maybe it *was* just a part of everyday life...

With a *click*, Isabelle opened her handbag and handed Amy a pair of small opera glasses.

"Here, Amy. You'll be able to see everything with these!"

"...Whoa!"

She stopped petting Tigger for a moment so she could bring the opera glasses to her face. She really *could* see everything, down to the look on her brother's face, which had only been a dot in the distance with her own two eyes. Amy was pleasantly surprised that the glasses focused on their own when she looked through them, without her having to adjust anything.

"Mother, these opera glasses are amazing! Man... Harold is bouncing all over the place."

"About what I'd expect from Hal. Your father made those glasses, you know."

“What? Really?”

“Yes. But that’s the only one—he doesn’t have enough materials to make another, and it’s quite difficult to make, in any case. So be very careful with them, okay? By the way, what do you think the lenses are made of?” Isabelle asked.

Amy tilted her head to the side. No matter how hard she stared at them, the lenses looked just like regular ones from their previous lives.

“Glass?”

Although glass existed in this world, no one had yet perfected shaping it into thin plates. Preserving the glass’s transparency and maintaining a uniform thickness was manual, not magical, work, so it was quite difficult.

But the lenses in the opera glasses looked like flawless glass lenses.

Smiling, Isabelle made a circle with her index finger and her thumb and put it up to her eye, which twinkled impishly through it.

“It’s sea serpent eyes!” giggled Isabelle.

“What?!”

Sea serpents were aquatic monsters that looked like dragons. Not only were they incredibly rare to run into, but they were also incredibly hard to kill. They were so rare, in fact, that her grandfather Rudolf had only encountered a few of them, and he had been out to sea countless times over many, many years.

“Your father says they’re the easiest material to process into lenses, but they’re a challenge to get a hold of.”

“I would think it’s impossible!”

Sea serpent eyes were one of the materials you could only get through hunting monsters, and even among those, it was one of the rarest of the rare materials. In fact, it was taking her father so long to make a camera because he couldn’t find a suitable alternative for the camera lens.

“Even though they’re both aquatic monsters, they’re actually quite different. Look—you see how a kraken looks like a massive squid? The cartilage is rather valuable, but its eyes are too soft—it wouldn’t work for lenses.”

“I-I see...”

“That’s why, as a mother, I would have been much happier if a sea serpent had appeared instead of a kraken... At least then the camera wouldn’t have been too far off!” Isabelle said, laughing in her carefree way. Amy, still worried for Harold’s safety, smiled awkwardly back.



THINGS were noisy aboard the hunting ship but not chaotic.

All the members of the army’s hunting party were skilled, of course, but the greatest factor was that the feudal lord Rudolf was also aboard today.

Though he was the margrave of the city, Rudolf took a very hands-on approach to his rule and spent more time at sea than he did on land. He single-handedly drove out sea monsters and pirates alike, and everyone in the town respected him the more for it.

Meanwhile, the three hunter students were eagerly awaiting their turn.

“Come *on*! Let me at ’em!!!”

“Hold your horses, Harold.”

“Don’t scold him for rushing forward and do the same thing yourself, Gil,” said Nick reasonably. “We are just students who came here to study, after all. We should just wait for instructions and do what they say.”

Harold didn’t seem to hear him. With swords in both hands and a foot on the side of the boat, he looked like he would jump in at any second.

Just below them, the top of the kraken’s head and its long tentacles were slithering in and out between the waves.

“It’ll be fine! All right, I guess I’ll go fir— HWAH?”

“Wait, you!”

Just as Harold had decided to dive into the ocean, someone had grabbed the scruff of his neck and yanked him back. Harold fell flat on his butt and started coughing. His grandfather Rudolf and another tall figure silently looked down at him.

“Hot-tempered. He’s a lot like you, Rudolf.”

“My! I’m not sure if he deserves such a high compliment,” Rudolf replied with a smirk.

The tall man wore a robe down to his ankles and had long black hair with a solitary streak of white. His sharp eyes and foreboding appearance may very well have been more frightening than the kraken winding beneath them.

“S-Sir Dion?!” Harold shouted. “Wha— What are you doing here...?!”



The terrifying man was Sir Dion—the ruthless professor of magic who had been noticeably absent from the reception on the front lawn. The three students wore similar looks of shock—they had no idea he was on their ship.

Time didn't freeze around them—the kraken continued to undulate around the ship, and the crewmates continued to prepare for battle—but the air in this corner of the ship felt tense for an entirely different reason.

Sir Dion glared at the novices with blue eyes like ice.

"I boarded first," he said sharply. "Is there a problem?"

"No, sir!" the three students said, jumping to attention.

Sir Dion gave them a quick once-over, nodded, and then pointed the short staff he held at Harold. Without a word from the magician, platinum-colored particles shot out from the tip of his staff, enveloped Harold's body, and then disappeared.

"You have fifteen minutes before that underwater breathing spell wears off. Surely you can finish off the kraken in that time, can't you?"

"Th-Thank you!"

Wasting no time, Harold leaped into the water. He joined forces with several members of the Hunting Unit that had already submerged and started slashing at the beast.

Gilbert and Nicholas readied their spear and crossbow, respectively, rushed over to their assigned stations, and provided backup from onboard the ship.

"You've gone soft on me, Dion."

"Look who's talking, old man. Will you be joining him, then?"

"Hm... I wonder..." Rudolf looked over the edge.

A loud wailing was coming from the sea. The cornered kraken was thrashing, whipping up even more waves around them. The seas became so rough that even experienced sailors nearly toppled over, but the margrave and the professor stood completely unbothered, without even holding on to anything for support.

There was a wet, sticky sound as one of the kraken's tentacles wrapped around the side of the boat just in front of them. An arrow soared from a crossbow and pierced a sucker.

Looking in the direction from which it came, they saw Nicholas, who nodded at them before returning his gaze back to the ocean.

Rudolf grinned, drew a sword from his belt, and cut the tentacle clear off.

"It doesn't look like they need me," he said before suddenly shouting, "Hey! Hey! Get those people off that fishing boat!"

In the end, they slayed the kraken with three minutes left to spare on Sir Dion's breathing spell.



WHEN the kraken had surfaced beside the hunting boat, many of the small fishing boats out at sea had quickly evacuated to shore. But one ship, appearing to have some mechanical trouble, had been unable to move at all.

Krakens generally tended to attack larger ships. Because its attention had been drawn to the hunting ship, it looked like the smaller fishing boat had escaped its notice as a target for most of the battle. But the smaller boat, which had almost capsized several times from being jostled by the rough waves, had finally gotten stuck at a severe tilt and started filling with seawater.

The two people on board were desperately clinging to the side of the ship to avoid being thrown overboard—neither of them could steer the vessel.

"M-Mom! That ship's in trouble!" Amy cried.

"They'll be all right; they sent out people to help them," Isabelle said calmly, looking through the opera glasses.

Amy could only see over Tigger's head as she hugged him in her lap.

A small boat had been dropped down from the hunting ship and was skillfully navigating the rough waves as it made its way toward the small fishing boat. One person leaped over to the sinking boat with some rope, and after securing it, the rescue boat started pulling them to shore.

"Oh, thank goodness...!"

“Your grandfather’s troops are outstanding, so you really don’t have to worry so much. Look—see for yourself.”

Isabelle handed Amy back the opera glasses with a smile. Blinking back tears, Amy looked through them and saw the two ships were giving a wide berth to the battle currently raging in the water and were steadily making their way to land.

The two people on the fishing boat—an old man and smaller person, perhaps his grandson—looked relieved, and Amy let out a deep breath.

When the two boats arrived at shore, the boat dispatched from the Hunting Unit turned around and headed back into the fray. One member from the force disembarked with the two from the fishing boat, and they headed to the terrace—the base of operations—to give a status report.

“Well, Amy—let’s go.”

Prompted by Isabelle, they rose from their seats. One of the duties of the feudal lord’s family was to sit with the townsfolk who had suffered misfortunes and to personally thank the troops and staff after a mission had finished.

Hm? What...?

She saw the grandfather and grandson from the small fishing boat.

The older man—likely the owner of the boat—explained that the rudder had suddenly malfunctioned, so they hadn’t been able to escape in time. Standing beside him was a boy around Amy’s age...or so she had thought. As she drew nearer, she realized she had been wrong—he was a she.

She wore worn-out boys’ clothes and her hair had been crammed into a wide-brimmed hat, so Amy’s assumption hadn’t totally been baseless, but she was a girl, nevertheless.

Moreover, she had an incredibly lovely face. She was sunburned, but she had great big green eyes, long eyelashes, and cute, pouty lips. Her features were distinct, but they were very easy to look at. There was a certain friendliness to them that drew you in and made you almost instinctively want to protect her.

Skirts weren’t suited for fishing, so many of the girls in town would wear boys’

clothes out on the water, so nothing about this girl was particularly strange.

But...for some reason, Amy felt uneasy.

"I can't imagine what you two have been through," offered Isabelle kindly. "I'm very glad you returned safely."

"M-Miss!" stammered the old man.

Although Isabelle was married and the mother of two, she was still called "Miss" in her hometown. It wasn't technically incorrect—she was still the daughter of the margrave—but she never went out of her way to correct them. "Madam" always reminded the townsfolk of her dearly deceased mother, Isabelle explained to Amy.

When Amy was very little, she would accidentally reply when someone called out "Miss" to her mother, but she'd just gotten used to it in recent years.

"Were you frightened?" Isabelle asked the girl.

"U-Uh, yes!"

Surprised by suddenly being addressed, the girl turned bright red and quickly removed her wide-brimmed hat.

Beautiful *pink blonde* hair spilled down her back.

Amy's mouth fell open.

"Was it your first time seeing a kraken?"

"Y-Yes. Um...we were really surprised, and then the rotating blades jammed and the rudder stopped working."

"That must have been very startling."

While they were having this casual conversation, the battle between the hunting ship and the kraken raged on. Amy was worried about how it was going, but her eyes were glued to the girl in front of her who was still blushing and talking to Isabelle.

That pink-blonde-haired girl...

Was she the one watching me yesterday?

The hair length was about the same, and she was certainly cute enough to be the heroine of a story... It was a little unusual that she was on a fishing boat wearing boys' clothes, but there were loads of different scenarios where heroines grew up economically disadvantaged, only to later become the adopted child of an aristocrat...

The hypothetical heroine in front of her only had eyes for Isabelle—she didn't meet Amy's gaze at all, as Amy stood a little farther behind her mother.

Amy had just come to the conclusion that villainesses, heroines, and otome games didn't matter anymore, but that didn't mean she wanted to run into any more potential characters!

Wh-What should I do...?!

Amy desperately hoped the girl wouldn't notice her, whether her suspicions about her being the heroine were right or not.

"Hey, mister! Get a load of this!"

One of the port office's staff members had been investigating the old man's fishing boat. He had picked up a translucent mass with his stick and threw it on the beach, where it landed with a *splash*. It was as large as a house fan, with a dome-shaped cap and many long legs.

"That's unusual... A deep-sea jellyfish?" the old man asked.

"It probably held on to the kraken and got dragged up to the surface. This was the reason your boat stopped working."

Deep-sea jellyfish looked soft, but they were very stretchy and slimy, and unlike the jellyfish usually found in the area, you couldn't cut them very easily. It looked as though the unlucky creature had gotten twisted around the propeller of the fishing boat.

Poor maintenance wasn't at fault, and no one had gotten injured, either. The grandfather and granddaughter were visibly relieved to hear that they wouldn't have to go through any annoying formalities with the port office and that it hadn't been their responsibility.

"The most important thing is that no one got hurt," said Isabelle. "You all have

done so wonderfully. It shouldn't be too much longer now!"

The port office workers beamed at Isabelle's radiant smile.

"Thank you very much, miss!" the worker said. "Oh—Miss Amy! The jellyfish can't move on land, but it has stingers, so he probably shouldn't touch it."

"Huh? Wha—? Stop, Tigger! Stay over here, okay?"

Amy quickly scooped up Tigger, who had clearly been about to start walking up to the jellyfish. Ever since the cat had seen the sea anemones and starfish in the tide pools, he had grown curious—not frightened—of marine life. He had certainly been eyeing the deep-sea jellyfish with great interest.

But it was more like she lifted him up instead of picked him up—Tigger's body was so large that his hind legs still reached the ground. But luckily, being held by Amy was enough to make him temporarily forget about the jellyfish. His long, bushy tail wrapped around Amy's leg and he purred contentedly.

She could tell from the cat's sweet purr alone, even without seeing his face, what he was feeling.

I love you, too, Tigger!

Just as Tigger forgot about the jellyfish, Amy's feelings of uneasiness about the hypothetical heroine faded and seemed very far away.

That was when the wind shifted, and they heard great cries of triumph from across the ocean.



AFTER successfully bringing down the kraken, the hunting ship was welcomed back to port with cheers of joy.

As the members of the Hunting Unit filed off the boat, Amy couldn't see a single injured person. One of the staff members from the port office had told her that she should head over there because there might be injuries, but it seemed Amy was not needed after all.

"Oh, Amy! We're over here!"

"Harold!"

Amy sighed in relief when she heard his familiar voice. Although she was confident in her healing magic, she didn't like seeing people in pain.

She jogged over to Harold and his friends, who were beckoning her over with smiles brimming with accomplishment.

Harold, who had participated in the battle underwater, was soaking wet, but after quickly glancing over the three of them, Amy didn't see any serious injuries. In fact, they looked like they had just come back from a rather wild amusement park ride rather than a battle.

"Did you guys get hurt?" she asked Harold.

"Just a little. Not anything that needs healing magic, so no worries. Oh! That's strange... Tigger's not with you?"

"No. It would be a little too dangerous with all the commotion over here, so I left him with Mom."

"Yeah, he doesn't seem to like places with a lot of people, does he?" asked Gil.

"It took him quite a while before he let us pet him, too," said Nick.

The three boys turned their sights to Tigger, who was hanging out by the port office. The cat was right by Isabelle's side, slightly hunched over on himself with his tail between his legs.

I just want to run over there and go pet him!

"Wait—" Harold said suddenly. "You guys have pet Tigger?!"

"He finally let us around the third time we came over," Nick said. "He's super fluffy and soft, isn't he, Gil?"

"He is! His neck is *super* fuzzy, softer than any stuffed animal ever created! And his meow is so adorable and sweet."

Harold looked at the two of them indignantly. He was Amy's brother and Tigger hadn't even allowed *him* to pet him! Harold had sometimes, however, been quick enough to reach out and touch him before he swerved away.

"I...I don't know what to say...," whined Harold, shoulders slumped.

Amy had been wondering how to get out of that sticky conversation, with no ideas of her own, but just at that moment, the defeated kraken was unloaded onto the beach. Taking advantage of this opportunity, she pulled at Harold's arm and redirected his attention.

"H-Harold! It's the kraken! Whoa, it's so big..."

She had seen its size through the opera glasses, but it felt totally different when it was partially submerged in the ocean from when its entire body was washed up on land.

Amy gazed with wide eyes. A winch was making creaking sounds as it pulled out the huge creature dripping with seawater.

It was slowly being lifted and placed on a prepared load-carrying wagon to transport it to a nearby slaughterhouse. Naturally, the creature did not survive the battle. Its tentacles were sticking out of the wagon in places.

"It's probably too big to fry up with some sauce, huh...," Amy muttered to herself.

"You—You can't eat it because it's poisonous!"

"Really?"

Harold muttered very quietly to her, "It's not a squid!"

I really can't eat it? What a shame...

"You won't die, but you'll go totally numb!" Nick asserted.

"No way, it'll mess up your insides!" said Gil.

The twins looked amused at the strange, naive reactions from a girl who spent most of her time inland and was too young to learn about the world at school. Nicholas tried explaining how the kraken was poisonous, it tasted terribly bitter, and applying heat to its body would harden it like rubber. There was no way it could be cooked as food.

"But its cartilage is very strong and flexible, so it's mostly useful as a material for defensive armor," he concluded.

"Oh, I see!"

“Hahaha! Did it look like food to you, Amy?”

“Grandpa?! I didn’t really mean it— Oh, Professor!”

Her grandfather and Sir Dion had appeared as she had been listening to the boys talk.

“Professor...!” cried the three boys in a panic.

The boys froze at attention once again at the appearance of Rudolf and Sir Dion. With a sidelong glance at the boys, Amy walked up to the older men with a smile and gave a pretty curtsy.

“Welcome back, Grandpa. I’m so glad you’re finally here, Professor. I was surprised when I saw you on the ship.”

“Oh, you saw?”

In the boys’ eyes, the satisfied hand placed atop Amy’s head and the smile that crept onto Sir Dion’s face were as rare as ancient relics buried in permafrost.

“Have you been practicing your magic?”

“Yes! I’m really excited for you to teach me a lot of new stuff!”

“Good. And starting tomorrow, we’ll have three more students joining us.”

With their hunt ending on the first day, the three boys thought they would have at least a day off until their next departure, and they panicked at the sudden extracurricular lesson.

“N-No, sir! Please don’t—”

“...Oh?” asked Sir Dion dangerously.

“We’d love to!!” all three said at once.

The group headed home for the day with one among their number vaguely remembering an old *izakaya* drinking establishment they used to go to with overly enthusiastic waiters...

Intermission: Back at the Royal Riding Grounds

EDWARD had just finished up a short horse ride when a snowy owl quietly descended and landed on the fence in front of him.

“Welcome back, Roodle,” Edward said kindly as he removed Ventus’s saddle and set it off to the side. “How was Amy?”

Roodle hooted impatiently. Edward gave him the snack he had prepared as his reward for a trip well flown and, with the other hand, deftly removed the letter from the cylinder tied to his leg.

Roodle only took a few bites to gobble up the snack and then started grooming his feathers with a satisfied look. Ventus, in an exceptionally good mood, was munching at the grass. Leaning slightly against him, Edward carefully unfurled the letter.

The penmanship was very neat, although some lingering childish quirks were still visible. He could recognize the handwriting—and the girl responsible for it—anywhere.

“Dear Ed, how are you? It’s already been ten days since I arrived at my grandfather’s house.”

The words on the page seemed to reverberate in his ears in a clear replication of her voice. Warmth enveloped his heart.

In the beginning, her letters sounded like they had been copied from etiquette textbooks, but in response to his request, she had started to change her wording and phrasing—her thoughts now sounded less filtered. Edward was thrilled at this. It seemed to represent how far they’d come.

Amy was at the coastal border province city of Wallum, a major stronghold for trade and defense. She seemed happy there. Edward smiled to himself at the thought of Amy walking along the beach with Tigger.

A laugh escaped his lips as he read the story of them getting drenched by the

surprise wave, but he came to a sudden stop at one sentence in particular.

“...my brother and my magic teacher should be coming soon...”

“...If I could fly like you, Roodle, Amy and I could collect seashells together...”

As a member of the royal family, Edward had never once questioned the fact that he couldn't go anywhere of his own volition.

He had only been able to meet Alexander and Amy because he was a prince —*because* he was a part of the royal family. He understood that, but...

A sad mutter escaped Edward's lips.

As if they heard him, Roodle fluttered off the fence and perched on Ventus's saddle, and Ventus suddenly looked up from grazing.

On his right, Ventus's dark eyes bore into him. On his left, Roodle's massive eyes darted over him in concern. A smile returned to Edward's face.

On that day, Edward lingered at the riding grounds. Amy's letter in one hand, he alternated between petting the area in between Ventus's twitching black ears and stroking the fluffy white feathers on Roodle's stomach.

Intermission: Back at the Border Province

ROUGHLY twenty years ago...

It was the day of the year the margrave welcomed students visiting Wallum for their field trips. The front lawn of Margrave Wallum's estate was jam-packed with students, as it was on this day every year.

"We finally made it! I'm doing my training at the port office, so I'm headed that way. What about you, Joshua?"

"I'm supposed to go to the magical tool workshop to help out with overseeing manufacturing and importing materials."

"Whoa, that sounds fun! I'll be an apprentice interpreter, so maybe we'll be able to work together. Oh—I see the margrave!"

Just as Joshua's friends and the rumor mill had said, Margrave Rudolf Wallum was every bit as intimidating in person.

He had short silver hair and sunburned skin. With a body so solid it could very well be made of steel and a ferocious-looking face, it'd make much more sense if he were a pirate captain—not an aristocrat.

Even though he was laughing, it didn't look like there was a single weakness in his vigilance. Joshua was convinced he could strike any one of them down in an instant the moment they turned their backs. The other students started talking among themselves.

"That reminds me—I heard the margrave has an only daughter."

"Yeah, Miss Isabelle. She's gonna be fifteen and doesn't even have a fiancé yet..."

"That's rough... Well, if she looks like the margrave, it probably would be difficult for her to find a partner..."

The other students painted the margrave's daughter in a very rude light in their imaginations, despite never having seen the poor girl. Whether or not the

margrave could hear them, Joshua didn't want anything to do with their conversation. He picked up his bag and started to head out.

"Oh, Joshua! I heard about a great store from one of the older guys. Loads of cute girls do their shopping there. Wanna go soon?"

"Not interested."

"You dweeb! You can't *make* a girlfriend out of magical tools, you know! ... Wait, who's that?"

The student's eyes zeroed in on the dainty girl standing behind the margrave's massive frame.

She was a spectacle to behold, with a cerulean dress the same color as the ocean and elegantly waving sandy-blond hair. Both of these, however, paled before her glittering eyes, golden like a wildcat's.

This lady suddenly turned toward Joshua's group with wide eyes, looking almost startled...then suddenly, she lit up in a smile.

"Whoa... She's beautiful...", one of the boys muttered.

"She must be visiting from a foreign kingdom...", another said. "Huh...? Is she coming over here?"

The young lady dashed straight for them...

And then threw her arms around Joshua's neck.

As the students around them stared, mouths agape, the bag in Joshua's hand fell to the ground with a *thud*.

"I had a feeling you were here, Hitoshi!"

"Yumiko..."

According to his friends' report of the night, it was like a scene out of a storybook. They could almost see giant roses blossoming around Isabelle as she ran up to him, giant confetti raining from the sky as they embraced each other, and her father, the margrave, standing behind them in the distance, the spitting image of a savage god of the sea.

That was the moment the Margrave of Wallum's daughter finally decided on

her future husband.



“**YOU** know, gushing over your own parents’ love lives isn’t exactly my idea of fun...,” Harold grumbled.

“Yeah...,” said Amy. “Although I suppose objectively it’s a romantic story.”

“Hal! Amy! Give me a break! I only told you about it because *you two* said you wanted to hear it!”

Isabelle was totally spellbound by the memories of her magical first meeting with Joshua. She was shielding her warm, pink cheeks with both hands. Opposite her, Amy and Hal looked like they’d rather be somewhere else...

“Uh...so...then you and Dad got married, right?” Amy asked, hoping the story was over.

“But there was trouble with Grandpa, you know!” Isabelle giggled. “Do you want to hear about that, too?”

“Ah... I’m all right, actually,” said Hal, standing up. “I feel like you’re just going to start blubbering on about Dad...”

“I-I was going to go on a walk with Tigger!”

“You don’t have to beat around the bush, you know!” Isabelle called after them.

After fondly watching her children leave the living room, Isabelle walked to the window. She looked down on the expansive front yard of the estate, where on that day twenty years before, two lost souls had been reunited.

“Hitoshi... I wonder if he’ll come early.”

Late that night, Joshua Northland finished his journey from the royal capital and arrived at his wife’s family home in Wallum.

Chapter 9: Trials and Training

THE Sea of Wallum was visible from the expansive garden behind Margrave Wallum's estate. There was a steep cliff on the side nearest to the beach, so, other than the lighthouse, there weren't any tall buildings in that area. It was a beautifully scenic location. Over the short safety railing, you could look out for miles across the open ocean.

One of the trees there had become Tigger's favorite spot.

Four people stood in a line, their backs to the glittering ocean—the three students who had gone out on the hunting boat the day before, and a younger girl who was barely tall enough to reach their chests.

The three boys were clearly nervous—only the chubby girl looked happy about the situation.

In front of them stood Sir Dion, the impressive former head magician, with sharp eyes that never seemed to miss a thing and a jet-black robe that seemed out of place beneath the bright blue sky.

Although they were on soft grass, the three boys felt like they could hear the sharp *click clack* of his footsteps in the lecture hall as he paced, and their backs immediately snapped into better posture.

"I will be using this today," Sir Dion told Tigger, who was sitting in the tree, as he approached it. Tigger wasn't disturbing Amy's class; he just wanted to be by her side.

Sir Dion plucked off four leaves from the branch where Tigger's tail was swishing and gave one to each student. The unblemished bright green leaves were so light they felt almost weightless.

"Keep your leaf at eye level without touching it with your hands."

Once he ordered them to begin, the four leaves started to float in front of their faces.

Despite its outwardly simple appearance, this special exercise was incredibly challenging.

Keeping the featherlight leaf suspended in the air amid the constant sea breeze, which was at times interfused with blasts of wind from different directions, required a precise degree of magical control.

Nicholas was good at magic, and this was reflected in his calm expression. But Gilbert had always been bad at it, and with his forehead wrinkled, he was managing to keep it afloat—but just barely.

Amy thought it was curious that the identical twins, who usually responded to everything in the same way, would have such different facial expressions during the challenge.

Amy's older brother Harold excelled at aerial combat with his dual blades, and while he was talented at outputting large amounts of magical power, he was not great at fine magical control. He was frantically adjusting his magical power back and forth, first sending the leaf flying too far above his head and then quickly making it plummet.

They carried on like that for ten minutes, then for fifteen... Sir Dion, however, was showing no indication that he was about to tell them to stop.

The continuous output of magical power for so long, while additionally needing to exert delicate magical control, put a great strain on their stamina. Their foreheads glistened with sweat—the color drained from their faces—but still, nobody dropped out.

Sir Dion sat on a chair of smoke he had conjured magically, one leg elegantly crossed over the other, and the look in his ice-blue eyes made it clear that giving up was not an option for the boys. This was only natural, as the girl beside them was six years younger and casually excelling at the same task.

With both hands held gently in front of her, and her leaf floating perfectly still, Amy was in such a good mood, she looked on the verge of humming to herself.



“You don’t look bothered,” Harold whispered to Amy under his breath.

“Hm? Well... I’m always taught alone back home, so it’s really fun being able to practice with you and your friends.”

Amy was still too young to debut in society, her father was typically not at home because of work, and Harold lived full-time at the school dormitories. On top of that, because Amy was naturally shy, her mother didn’t force her to tag along to social events, so Amy usually spent her time by herself.

In other words, Amy didn’t have any friends to study or hang out with.

Part of the reason why it was difficult for Amy to make friends was because she had a tendency to harden her expression when she became nervous, and her beautiful facial features made her appear a little standoffish.

But the impression Amy made on others softened ever since the extra weight rounded out her face. Moreover, she had been smiling markedly more frequently since Tigger’s arrival. Her genuine, guileless smile may have appeared to some a bit unsophisticated, but many wanted to protect that innocence as well.

As she turned this smile to the boys and bashfully expressed her appreciation for joining her for the lesson today, their feeble complaints died in their throats.

After all, this type of exercise was often included in their school’s basic training sessions. It was usually done for only a few minutes as a warm-up, but slightly extending the duration of such a simple exercise *shouldn’t* have been a problem for the experienced students.

It certainly wasn’t easy for the boys—having their magical power chipped away slowly but steadily was like receiving a series of sharp body blows without any respite—but, being Amy’s elders, they wanted to show off a little bit.

“Nice work!” cried Nick. “You can’t ease up now, Gil!”

“But Amy’s so good at this!” Gil replied. “Do you do this exercise a lot?”

Amy briefly looked away from the leaf levitating in front of her to smile at the twins.

“Yeah! I do it around thirty minutes a day for regular practice.”

“Th-Thirty minutes?!”

“Well, sometimes I change the height or use three leaves,” she admitted, brows knitting together as she spoke. “But it’s a little hard with the professor conjuring wind from different directions... I just can’t keep it totally still.”

The three boys were stunned. Amy was doing training exercises only a few students in the advanced magic classes at school would be able to do.

“Changing the height...? Levitating multiple...? Just how advanced are you?!” they sputtered.

From the way Sir Dion acted yesterday, the students had assumed he was fond of Amy. But knowing that he was teaching her much more difficult magic than he taught them, and he wasn’t even going easy on her... Their smiles froze awkwardly in place.

“...If you have the energy to chitchat, perhaps I’m not challenging you enough.”

Harold let out a yelp of surprise at Sir Dion’s voice—none of them had noticed him approach. Sir Dion suddenly conjured four large orbs of water to float above their heads with a blank look on his face.

“The moment one of you lets their leaf fall, all the water orbs will break.”

“Watch it, Gil!” Nicholas shouted. “Yours is dropping!”

“Huh—? Ah!” Gil caught it just in time.

“And we’ll add this as well,” Sir Dion continued. Pointing his staff at them, a wind tunnel shot out, surrounding them.

Even Nicholas’s outlook looked poor with this new addition to the training exercise.

“Wow, it’s so beautiful!”

The wind conjured by Sir Dion contained mica-like glitter specks, which shimmered dazzlingly under the sun.

Sir Dion watched Amy’s golden eyes sparkle as she followed the glitter swirling around her, and his expression softened for a fraction of a second.

Then he turned around unsympathetically and headed back to the estate. The screams of the three boys intermingled with Amy's laughing cheers and rang throughout the garden.

"What the heck?! This is so freakin' hard!"

"Gil—raise yours more!"

"Nick, why is my water orb *steaming*?!"

"This is so much fun! It's like a game!"

In almost no time, a series of noises reverberated throughout that garden overlooking the sea—first a *pop*, like the sound of a balloon bursting, and then the torrential sounds of a waterfall.



"**THAT** certainly looked like fun!" said Isabelle cheerfully, conjuring wind to dry their soaked clothes. "I made some tea, so why don't you guys take a little break? Sir Dion, I appreciate you coming all the way out here." Then, addressing the group again, she added, "I've set out some cott cake, as well."

The cott nut, which resembled a walnut, was one of the tree nuts in this world that contained magical power. Eating them would not increase the total amount of magical power a person could store in their body, but it would replenish any magic that had been depleted.

These long-lasting baked goods, usually made with other tree nuts with similar effects, were popular as packaged foods for magicians.

Amy always became hungry after using magic. Her face glowed, and she looked up at Sir Dion.

"I *am* hungry, Professor."

"That's because you are often wasteful when you use magic. You mustn't forget to cast efficiently."

"Okay, sir!"

Amy knew she had been so excited to do a magic exercise with her brother and his friends that her focus had been too lax on her casting control. Amy

noded soberly, and Sir Dion patted the top of her head.

Tigger, who had guessed they were taking a break, got down from the tree and trotted over to Amy, tail upright. When he rubbed the sides of his body against her legs and meowed cutely at her, all she could do was smile and pet him.

Amy and the three boys went to sit under the big gazebo in the corner of the garden for teatime. The adults and children naturally forked off and sat some distance apart, and the conversation shifted from the training exercise to the events of the day before.

“That reminds me, I’ve been wanting to tell you...,” Harold said, turning to Amy. “This house has a waterway along the inside of the fence by the main road, right? Make extra sure that Tigger doesn’t fall in it.”

There were several canals connecting her grandfather’s estate to the ocean and were useful for preventing trespassing and for emergency use in case of fires. They were not very wide, but they were deep, so the children had been warned over and over since they were little never to go near them.

Amy tilted her head at the unnecessary warning.

“I know they’re dangerous, but why bring it up now?”

“You remember the deep-sea jellyfish that got caught up in that fishing boat? Apparently, that’s where they set it free.”

“I-I see.”

Deep-sea jellyfish had stingers and turned virtually invisible underwater. As the name implied, they typically lived in the deep sea, but they were so hardy, they had been known to stay alive even in the sand bar.

Her grandfather, it seemed, had boldly suggested that, instead of returning it to the sea, they might as well put it to use preventing crime in the canal.

“But enough of the deep-sea jellyfish, Harold! What about the girl from the boat it got snagged on?” said Nick.

“Oh yeah!” Gil chimed in. “She was really chatting you up at the victory party, wasn’t she?”

There had been a victory party for the successful kraken hunt at the army barracks the previous evening. Of course, with it being so late, the ten-year-old Amy did not attend, but the grandfather and granddaughter from the fishing boat they had saved showed up briefly to personally thank the hunting party members.

Between Gilbert's and Nicholas's teasing, Amy gathered that the granddaughter had said something to Harold at the party.

"Yeah, she said I was good with my dual blades," said Harold. "During the battle, I did think she was looking at me a lot, but that was because my swords stood out."

Harold's blades were certainly eye-catching. However, when he barely managed to conceal a smug grin as he spoke, Amy wondered if he was only brushing it under the rug because she was sitting there.

...But she also ruminated over the fact that the hypothetical heroine had chatted with her older brother.

Amy petted Tigger, who was sitting on her lap and purring contentedly, and she became very still.

"But then again, Hal was mostly underwater yesterday...," mused Nick. "Was he really that active in the battle...?"

"I'm not sure... I was too busy on lookout duty," replied Gil.

"How heartless!" cried Hal. "Let me bask in the glow of Maria's compliment for a day at least before you start tearing me down!"

Amy's head popped up at the girl's name, and the hand she had been petting Tigger with froze in place. Tigger pressed his paws into her stomach grumpily. She unconsciously hugged him close, grateful for the way his magnificent weight pressed against her, grounding her.

Her name is Maria...? That means...she must really be the heroine...

Amy unconsciously plopped a piece of cake into her mouth and munched loudly on the cott nuts.

"So her name is Maria!" said Nick. "Well...what else did you guys talk about?"

“Well, not much. She is the same age as Amy, though.”

“Ah... She’s that young? Tough break.”

“It wasn’t anything like that!” Harold protested. “She was just...a fan of mine. Or something like that.”

Rolling her eyes at the noisy back-and-forth of the three high-school-aged boys, Amy picked out one of the cott nuts from the cake and gave it to Tigger. Cats loved the crunchy, chewy nut, too.

It didn’t sound like Harold and Maria talked about anything particularly related to the game...

Maybe I’ll stop worrying just a little bit...

As she chuckled at the cat gobbling up the cott fruit from her hand, a black shadow rose behind them.

“It looks like you’ve had enough of a break. Back to work.”

“Sir Dion! A-Already?!” complained Harold.

“If I have to wait for you to get started, the lesson will only get harder from here.”

“We’re on our way!” the boys yelled together.

Thanks to the comforting balm of having Tigger on her lap, along with the rigorous magical training that had followed, by the time Amy returned to her room that night, she couldn’t remember any of the worries she had over the hypothetical heroine.



AND so that was how the kraken was subdued. I’m really glad no one ended up getting seriously hurt.

I thought it was massive, but I was shocked when someone told me that it was only a medium-sized kraken! I wonder why sea creatures get to be so big... Is it because the sea is so wide? Do you know, Ed?

I was pretty surprised that Sir Dion had gotten on the hunting ship in advance, too. But he’s been able to teach me magic here, so I can get lots of practice in. I

know you're working really hard studying, so I'll work really hard, too!

Sincerely,

Amy

Looking once more over the letter Roodle had brought him, Edward carefully stored it in a drawer and left his room.

It was still a little while before the agreed-upon meeting time, but Edward had no intention of being late.

Not that royalty was held to the same standards regarding punctuality. Edward could leave however late he wanted, and it would probably be impossible for the other person to refuse his visit. But Edward was not that arrogant, and he really didn't want to give a bad impression to the person he was about to see.

Edward proceeded down the hallway with his two guards, as he had countless times before, but this time, things felt different.

Am I...nervous? Edward wondered.

Whenever he had interviews with special envoys from foreign kingdoms, went out on royal tours, or took part in ceremonies, Edward would always be calm—his heart would never beat as quickly as it was now.

He was a little amused at himself for feeling this way—he was only going to hear a lecture.

When Edward arrived at the Institute of Magic, he was neither late nor absurdly early. He headed confidently toward the Department of Technology. When he informed the administrative officials that he had arrived, they nearly tripped over themselves to open the door. He reached the director's office and saw Joshua, the Earl of Northland, standing and waiting for him.

"Welcome to the Institute of Magic, Your Highness," he said with a bow.

Joshua was not only the clever director of the Department of Technology—he was also Amy's father.

"Thank you for accepting my request for private lessons, Lord Northland," said Edward, bowing deeply. Joshua's eyes widened in surprise and admiration at the prince's courtesy.

The two sat on the sofa for some time in mutual silence. Joshua was the first

one to break the ice.

“I didn’t know you had an interest in magical tools, Your Highness.”

“Does it surprise you?”

“It had been my understanding that the royal family was not all that interested in technological advancements outside of times of war. Incidentally, Your Highness, I hope you don’t feel like you have to be extra polite with me. I am just one of your subjects, after all.”

“But you are not—here, you are my teacher. I’m very grateful you are sparing some of your incredibly valuable time as the director to give me private lessons,” Edward said without a trace of shame.

Joshua once again stared in wonder.

Shortly after the fiancée candidate tea party, the prince had started making overtures about wanting to study magical tools. The start date had been postponed due to schedule conflicts, but in accordance with Edward’s wishes, it had been decided that Joshua would give Edward private lectures two to three times a month.

It would have been very reasonable for Edward to ask Joshua to visit the royal palace for the lectures, but the prince said he would make the trip out here for them.

But Joshua had no objections on that point. Some prototypes were prohibited from being taken out of the Institute of Magic, and some things, like the actual process of manufacturing the tools, needed to be seen in person as they were being explained.

He seems different from the two older princes, thought Joshua.

“But if someone were to hear you—perhaps the prime minister—wouldn’t that raise some eyebrows?”

“He takes notice of me very rarely—if ever. But either way, our conversations are not leaving this room, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Joshua’s own eyebrows lifted imperceptibly. Edward had said that so matter-of-factly, his face unmoved by his words.

Joshua had known that the Third Prince had spent his whole life being pressured to be as unobtrusive as air. But hearing Edward himself describe this reality—enforced even by the prime minister—so emotionlessly, without a hint of solemn resignation or emptiness, brought out an emotion in Joshua that was very difficult to describe.

“...I understand. As you wish, Your Highness. Well, then shall we begin? We’ll start today from the very basics. Because this is the first lecture, we’ll review familiar concepts, and then we’ll start talking about magical tools themselves.”

Joshua took out a thin, round metallic object from his breast pocket.

The cover opened with a *click* and revealed three clock hands of different colors. It looked like an ordinary pocket watch, but it was slightly different. The hands were all the same length and didn’t seem to be ticking away time.

“That’s the magical tool for communication, right? I’ve seen maids and guards use them before,” Edward said, looking at the knight standing in front of the door. “But the one you’re holding looks a little different from the ones they use.”

Joshua nodded, looking thrilled that he spotted the difference.

“That’s right! The type we supply to the royal palace only has two hands. This version with three is a prototype used for research purposes, so you’ve likely never seen one exactly like it before. Did you know there are notches on the bezel?”

Joshua pointed to the bezel—the exterior frame that circled the outer circumference of the tool’s face. The numbers zero to nine, as well as star, moon, and sun designs, were engraved in fixed intervals around the bezel.



“This tool was designed so that the magic wavelengths coming from the magical stone inside change depending on where the hands are pointed. Therefore, only when the hands of two of these magical tools are aligned to the same number is communication between them possible.”

By changing the combination of the hands, one could finely restrict the range of communication, making it possible for those in need to be in contact with each other.

“Right now, each department has been assigned their own number,” said Joshua.

“But as long as the hands on any device can be set to the same position, doesn’t that mean random people can jump in on the communication line, too?”

Joshua looked pleased with Edward’s question.

“You noticed that, did you? Yes, it’s possible. A random person could even listen in on the conversation without saying a word, completely unnoticed. I intentionally didn’t add a feature to block others from doing that.”

“So that it wouldn’t be used to hatch evil plans?”

With that feature, people would be able to hold secret discussions without meeting in person and without leaving physical evidence—like letters—behind. From there, it wasn’t a stretch to assume people would come up with the idea of using it for evil.

At least, I didn’t think it was a stretch, but Joshua looks rather amused..., thought Edward.

“If I added that function, the tool would have become too large and heavy to carry around comfortably. I would have also had to use a much higher quality magical stone as the conduit, which would have caused issues on both the technical and financial end of things.”

Edward blinked in surprise, completely thrown for a loop at his answer, although it was a perfectly reasonable train of thought for an engineer.

“Well, there are certainly others who think the same way you do,” Joshua

continued. "I've heard there might be some departments that specialize in intercepting communication lines day in and day out."

Edward wondered if this might have been why several aristocrats had recently and suddenly lost their standing without a reason being publicized, but he wisely didn't bring it up.

"We should be explaining the tools that are given to people before they are used...", admitted Joshua. "But it's very strange that there are so many people who don't connect the dots like you did, and you're not even an adult."

Edward also kept it to himself that the director was strongly reminding him of Alec whenever he would play pranks on unsuspecting people.

"I heard that this magical tool was your invention, Director."

"You heard correct. There was someone I wanted to get in touch with faster than messenger birds could carry letters."

Joshua mentioned that he first created it because Isabelle had become pregnant with Harold. Early on in the pregnancy, Isabelle had collapsed several times due to severe morning sickness, so Joshua created the tool to be able to contact her if there was ever an emergency. As it happened, a high official had seen it, and at his request, Joshua created a simplified version that could be mass-produced, and it grew into the popular tool used today.

Not many in Luducia were aware that many of the unique, incredibly convenient tools used in the royal palace were originally created for the Earl and Countess of Northland's personal motivations. Even now, Joshua was working tirelessly to develop a camera at the request of his beloved wife and daughter...but the lens was taking more time than he had anticipated.

"Magical tools can be devices for good or evil, depending on the person using them. But in any case, let's look back to the very beginning..."

For some time after that, Joshua lectured on how magical tools came to be.

It was interesting hearing the various origin stories. Edward had been exposed to such tools every day, so he felt he understood them, but in reality, he didn't at all. He was so engrossed in the lecture that he completely lost track of time.

Joshua, encouraged by the smart questions Edward occasionally interjected, pressed on with his lecture. If the guard knight hadn't shyly piped up that they should probably be heading back soon, Joshua might have continued the lecture until the sun had set.

"Those were some fascinating stories. I'm looking forward to the next lecture."

"I will admit I misjudged you—it seems you do have a genuine appreciation for magical tools," Joshua remarked. "Let's keep exploring that interest until we reach its natural end... Your interest in my daughter, however, is another matter."

Edward started in surprise—until that moment, they had both steered clear of breaching the topic of Amy.

"With all due respect, I have no intention of letting my daughter marry anyone until at least the spring of her eighteenth year, no matter who the fiancé is."

"Eighteen?"

The age of adulthood in Luducia was fifteen—waiting until eighteen for marriage was a little on the late side for aristocratic ladies.

Unless the fiancé were studying abroad, it was common for high-ranking ladies to marry at sixteen or seventeen, typically following an engagement period of a year after they came of age.

As Joshua spoke, he met Edward's eyes, and Edward felt the weight of his words.

"For that matter, I'd really like Amy to stay at the Northland house until she's twenty years old."

That was *certainly* late for marriage. Unless there was some unavoidable pretext to explain it, a nasty rumor would probably get spread around about the lady herself or her family.

Surely Joshua would know the consequences of what he was asking, but he looked very serious.

“Is there a reason for this rule?” asked Edward.

Eighteen years old... I'll let her graduate high school, at least, Joshua thought.

In this world, Joshua couldn't tell anyone else the hopes he had for his daughter that had been dashed in their past life. She never even made it to adulthood in Japan, which was age twenty.

“It's probably hard for you to understand...but I just ask that you can accept that, as a father, there are certain things I cannot concede.”

For a brief moment, the two men only exchanged serious looks in silence, but Edward suddenly smiled, and the unspoken balance shifted.

“You're asking me for an eight-year postponement, then?”

“B-But...don't you need a fiancée, Your Highness?”

“There's no big rush. Besides, there's no one else I'd want to make my fiancée.”

Of all the ladies who had gathered for the tea party, Amy was the only one he kept in contact with.

Joshua's brow furrowed in confusion, not understanding what Edward was really getting at. The prince smiled even wider.

“I want Amy to fall in love with me, so I'm going to do my best to become a man worthy of her.”

As Joshua watched the thirteen-year-old prince leave the room, he remarked to himself that Edward looked rather taller than he had when he entered.



HELLO, Ed. *How have you been? Tigger and I have been doing very well.*

My father finally arrived at Wallum, so now the whole family's here. But my older brother is out on a patrol boat right now, so he's not really “here,” per se. Apparently, they go patrolling to prevent any damage from sea life.

I haven't seen any mermen or selkies yet. Have you ever seen one, Ed?



ED! Sea serpent eyes! My dad was happy, of course, but my mom was **thrilled!** Thank you so much! Can we really accept such a wonderful gift? But...I'm so happy! I really hope there's something I can give you in exchange...

I heard from Dad that you've started studying magical tools. Keep it between us, but he was speaking very highly of you. You didn't hear it from me!



IT'S been three months since I came to Wallum, and the seawater is getting colder by the day. This year my grandfather encouraged us to stay longer than we typically do. Tigger has gotten used to playing at the tide pools, and I think I've improved a lot at horse riding. I might even be able to ride Fente on my own now.

My mother will return to the royal capital for a little bit next week, but it's been decided that I will go straight to our home in Northland territory, so I won't be able to see you again until the New Year, will I? I bet the royal capital is cold, isn't it? Have you—or Marvin, or anyone else—caught a winter cold yet? Also, I'll be sending you a card for Snow Day!



THANK you for the beautiful card, Ed! It was the first time I'd ever seen a card that made it snow when you opened it! I was so surprised. My father only looked a little annoyed and muttered, "Using it like this..." He told me to tell you that you "passed," but...does that mean that was an assignment from one of your lectures?

I got a letter from Duchess Camilla that said Alec had gotten a sudden growth spurt. My mom says I got taller, too, so you might be surprised when you see me next!



THINGS still feel a little different since coming home after so long... But you and Alec have gotten so tall! I've gotten so big that I've had to have new dresses made. Not quite big enough to be able to lift Tigger's whole body, though.

A new friend of mine told me that drinking goat's milk makes you taller. My grandpa heard that and gave me two baby goats. One is black and one is white,

and they're both so cute!

I was told they were both girls, but the white one is a boy. I'm sure my grandpa didn't realize that...



YOUR Highness Edward,

Congratulations on entering school.

You'll be sharing a dormitory room with Alec now, right? I'm sure it will be difficult writing letters like we have been from now on, so I will refrain in the future.

I hope you have a fun school life.



***ED...** Do you really mean it when you say we can continue with these letters? I'll continue writing as I usually did, then, but...don't feel pressured to respond or anything, okay?*

Have you gotten used to school and life in the dormitory? You just missed being in classes with my brother—he's graduated now—but Harold said he was going to come visit next month because there was something he had to do there. I really want to try taking one of Sir Dion's magic classes at school, too...



***I'VE** known about it for a while, but it's still a little sad hearing about Roodle's retirement, isn't it? But at least he'll still carry out letters for us as he always has...*



AFTER taking a bath at the bathhouse on Margrave Wallum's estate, Amy returned to her room. Droplets of water were falling from her black hair, so she conjured wind to dry it.

Amy's magical beauty routine was quite laborious, having to adjust the magic power to account for the season and her own physical condition. Nevertheless, she followed the advice of her mother, who emphasized the necessity of grooming ("Hair and skin are important!"), and Amy had achieved a precise level of magical control because of it.

Now fourteen, Amy's body was still chubby, but she had become much taller, and with her long limbs and pointed chin, she didn't look quite as round as she once did.

Compared with other girls her age, however, the difference was clear. To put it simply, Amy was somewhat...perhaps a little, well...plump. This was also evidenced by the fact that she was still cherished by the Duchess of Coverdale as a specially acknowledged friend.

When Amy opened the door to her room, she could hear Tigger's high-

pitched *meow* and the sounds of his toy ball rolling around. Tigger had become much less shy of strangers compared with when she adopted him, but he still loved Amy most of all.

It had been four years since she adopted him. Because they had developed such a secure bond over the years, he became less anxious even when Amy was out of sight. He was now capable of occupying himself alone, like he had been with the ball.

The ball had a bell in the middle and was roughly the size of a small kickball. Strangely, Tigger had become obsessed with it—he typically didn't show much interest in toys. Maybe he liked the quiet sounds of the bell, only audible if you listened very carefully.

He deftly rolled it around with his front paws and chased after it. The ball had lasted for such a long time because he never clawed at or bit it.

“Looks like you're having fun, Tigger!”

Amy couldn't help smiling at the sight of her cat playing as if in a trance. The ball rolled up to her feet and she swiftly picked it up—and Tigger followed it up to her hand and jumped for it.

Amy stumbled as she caught him, and then she hugged him tightly.

“Ah... Soft and fluffy as always.”

A farewell party had been held that night because Amy and the others were returning to the royal capital the following week. The adults were still at the party, but Amy had excused herself early to go back to her room. She sat on her bed and held Tigger. She had many acquaintances, but she had not gotten used to so many people being around her at once, and she was totally exhausted.

Amy would begin going to school in the capital starting the following month.

Although she had been a student in her past life, things would probably be very different in this world. She was quite nervous about the huge changes that were about to happen in her life, but she was equally excited, too.

Her thoughts turned to her study of magic, which had not yet truly begun. Her healing magic had improved considerably, of course, but magic was the sort of

thing where there was no real end to your learning—there was always room to improve.

Over the past few years, Amy had been helping out with the duchess's "Cat Club," working alongside a veterinarian to help provide medical treatment to animals. Even with the Cat Club, Amy needed her magic to protect each cat.

That realization helped Amy decide what she should be doing with her life. Wherever Amy was, the driving motivator that inspired her had always been—and would always be—animals.

Several cards that had recently been placed on the sideboard suddenly caught her eye. There were ones from Harold, who had become a traveling hunter; Edward, who was in the royal capital; Alexander; Sir Dion, her professor of magic; and several fellow cat lovers.

Everyone was eagerly awaiting Amy's return to the royal capital for school.

...If an otome game were to begin, it would probably start while I'm a student because that's the trope...

But then again, Amy rationalized that she had not seen the "hypothetical heroine" ever since the day of the kraken hunt, either in Wallum or the royal capital.

But that didn't mean her worries were completely gone...

What's important? she reminded herself. *If you don't lose sight of that, and if you do everything you possibly can...things just have to turn out okay!*

"Yeah! I can do this!"

Holding the utterly exhausted Tigger against her chest, Amy slumped down into bed, her heart warming at Tigger's soft purring.

You're more likely to have sweet dreams when you sleep with someone you love.

Almost immediately after Amy reached out and turned off her bedside lamp, she and Tigger snuggled and flew off together into the land of dreams.

Intermission: A Night in Wallum

“YOU must be exhausted, dear.”

Joshua Northland had arrived at Margrave Wallum’s estate just before midnight. He was met by his wife, Isabelle, as soon as he stepped off the carriage.

Work had made Joshua’s arrival lag slightly behind the rest of his family, but now all the members of the Northland family were finally accounted for in Wallum.

Unfortunately, however, Joshua was not in a position where he could take extended vacations from work, so he had to return to the royal capital the following week.

Every year during Isabelle’s trip to Wallum, Joshua felt a bit like a traveling salesman, forced to temporarily live apart from his family because of work, but the short-term long-distance never truly bothered him.

“Amy’s probably sleeping at this hour, isn’t she?”

“Well, she *is* ten,” teased Isabelle. “Want to see for yourself?”

After Joshua exchanged a few words of greeting with his father-in-law, Joshua and Isabelle continued down the hall, in rapt conversation after being apart for so long. The topic of their children dominated the conversation—mainly Amy.

Harold was pretty much the same as he always was. Joshua had already heard the exciting tale of his participation in the kraken hunt.

“I met Prince Edward, by the way,” he said.

“Oh! Isn’t he such a nice boy?”

“I didn’t have any problems with his character.”

“No matter which world you find yourself in, the powerful always seem to be burdened with so many troubles, don’t you think? They don’t ask to be born

into their position, and yet they're never truly free."

"You're quite his advocate, aren't you?"

"Well, he's Amy's friend," Isabelle said, chuckling. Joshua couldn't detect any hidden meaning to her words—everything she said came from the heart.

"From what he told me, it doesn't sound like her *friend* wants to keep it that way."

"My word! Did he really say so? Oh, phooey! I wanted to be there when he got around to saying that! So then, what was your response?"

Prompted by the shining eyes of his wife, Joshua somewhat awkwardly asked her to forgive him for what he was about to tell her.

"Well... I told him I wasn't going to let her marry anyone until she turned eighteen."

"Hitoshi..." Isabelle gave him a small smile. "That was a little silly."

Even if that wasn't how things were done in this world, she deeply understood why her husband felt that way. They were reincarnated into a different world—they were different people altogether—but there were still some lingering feelings and social expectations from their previous lives that couldn't be erased. They would both view Amy as a child until she turned eighteen, at least.

"Well, it's too late to cry over spilled milk, I suppose," Isabelle continued. "Bit unfortunate for those two, but they'll just have to wait another eight years."

Joshua and Isabelle quietly opened the door to their sleeping daughter's room. The inside was faintly illuminated by the moonlight spilling in from the window and by the dim magical lamp in the room. Since she was very little, Amy had always preferred sleeping with a soft light on in the room.

There was not one, but two round lumps atop the bed. Amy and Tigger were sleeping together—Amy on her side, turned inward, and Tigger beside her. Tigger's fluffy orangey-brown and black front legs were tangled up in Amy's stretched-out arms. Even though they likely really wanted to hug each other, in this season, they were both probably too hot.

Amy mumbled something incoherent in her sleep, stirred slightly, and was about to tug her arm away. With his eyes still closed, Tigger stubbornly clung even tighter to her arm, and Amy smiled in her sleep.

“I want...camera...,” Amy mumbled.

“Right?!” Isabelle blurted out before quickly covering her mouth with her hand.

As the two parents scampered away to avoid waking them up, they heard the thumping sound of a swishing tail. Joshua, the director of technology at the Institute of Magic, was filled with a renewed resolve to develop a camera as soon as possible.



TWO days later...

“Oh, Joshua. A package has arrived for you.”

“Thank you, Rudolf... From the royal palace?”

It was sent by Prince Edward.

Joshua considered the package with some trepidation, having no idea what Edward could have sent. He carefully broke the seal. Out of the securely wrapped package came something that glittered in the light shining in from the window—

“Sea serpent eyes.”

“Oh my word—that’s incredible!” cried Isabelle. Joshua read the attached letter.

These were items personally given to me by an envoy from a foreign kingdom, but not knowing what to do with them, I’ve just been holding on to these for many years without any real use for them. I heard from Amy that you were looking for some, so you can have them if you’d like.

I’d much rather they be put to good use than just sit collecting dust in the back of a shelf, hidden from the light of day.

“There are no undertones suggesting you return the favor, nor is he trying to

curry favor with you,” Isabelle said, reading over the letter. “Quite a model student, wouldn’t you say?”

Joshua cleared his throat and looked away.

“I’m not so easily affected by gifts. I don’t feel a thing!” he said, carefully picking up the package and practically skipping off to his room.

Chapter 10: School

IN the Kingdom of Luducia, there was the Royal Academy.

The majority of the students were children of aristocrats who had completed an elementary education. Commoners weren't barred from attending, but because of the school's steep tuition and rules regarding commuting, the reality was that commoners had to be either decently wealthy or have good enough grades to receive scholarships to attend.

Enrollment began at age fourteen. There was no set number of years a student had to attend, nor was there a set curriculum. Under the Royal Academy's system, a student would leave once they had acquired the skill or degree necessary for their course of study and the faculty approved their graduation.

As a result, the timing of enrollment and graduation depended on each student.

Enrollment was only required of the eldest son of aristocratic families. But there was much more they could get out of school besides the chance to pursue knowledge. As the next generation, it was vital for them to learn how to socialize and gain new acquaintances at the school, where aristocratic children from all over the world attended as full-time students or through study abroad trips.

Even if the aristocrats lived far away from the royal capital, many of them had second homes there, so it was possible for them to commute. However, the sons of the royal family and high-ranking nobles were sent to live in the dormitories to "expand their horizons through communal living." As a result of wanting to follow this practice, it became customary for all the boys to live in the dormitories.

But there were no girls' dormitories, so female students had to either commute from their homes in the royal capital (if they had any) or temporarily

move in with a relative who lived closer to the school.

It was only relatively recently that girls started attending the school at all.

During Amy's parents' generation, aristocratic ladies were given an education only through private governesses, and then they would marry. Any outside education was limited to private etiquette classes.

In recent years, Luducia's conflicts with neighboring kingdoms had subsided, tensions in the kingdom had calmed, and the populations' eyes finally turned toward education, with new attitudes towards girls' enrollment in schools.

But things were not completely egalitarian. Compared with the male students, who on average would attend school for three years or more, female students would attend school for far less time, with many only attending for one or two years. There were also many engaged female students who simply went to school until the preparations for their weddings were finished.

With all the memories she had of her previous life, Amy was very uncomfortable that there wasn't any compulsory education in Luducia, and that (in the same social class, at least) men and women were so unequal. But when she thought back to what she could remember of her past life, Japan's well-regulated educational system had only been around for a few decades.

From what her father had told her when she was a high school student, women in Japan hadn't been granted suffrage until after the Second World War, and until about thirty years before, the percentage of men and women who continued on to university was at most 30 percent of the population—although there was likely some variation between urban and rural areas.

Amy remembered learning a Japanese nursery rhyme about a girl who got married at fifteen. It was written not even one hundred years before the Heisei era, the time in which Amy lived in her past life.

If she counted using the traditional Japanese age system, which considered the day of birth as one year old, the fifteen-year-old from the nursery rhyme would actually be fourteen... *The same age I am now*, Amy realized.

But she still thought it was an early age for marriage, regardless.

What she remembered as "common sense from her previous life" was

actually limited to a very small period of time in modern Japan, dwarfed by the long history of the whole wide world. She had only truly realized that since being reincarnated into a different life.

Now that there was no way to check her vague recollections of the history and politics she had learned in her classes, it was very dangerous to judge her current life based on “facts” that could more appropriately be called “memories.”

It was natural to compare her two lives, but there wasn’t any need to assign superiority. Both this world and the last had their own histories and methods. If Amy were to tackle those issues, she needed to be adequately prepared and armed with knowledge, because change would only be possible with a solid foundation.

This world was riddled with sexism and human rights issues that experts in her previous life would have written award-winning editorials about. If this were a novel, it might have been conventional for her to passionately strive for reforms, but right now, fourteen-year-old Amy just accepted it as part of her new everyday life.

Her attitude as a former run-of-the-mill high school girl bled through, and she just thought politics were tiresome.



THE afternoon sunlight filtering through the trees from the clear sky above cast beautiful shadows across the cloister floors circling the courtyard. Amy had finished her foreign language class and was enjoying tea with her friend on the lounge terrace that overlooked the courtyard.

They were surrounded by other ladies around the same age. Apart from the classes, the other school facilities were co-ed. The boys, however, were rarely brave enough to venture here, as it was always full of girls, so it had, for all intents and purposes, become a relaxing, comfortable, girls-only room.

The room looked magical, with the ladies in their neat, school-appropriate dresses holding teacups in one hand and whispering and giggling behind the other.

The tables were covered with firm tablecloths, and employees were stationed next to them specifically for serving the ladies. The room was designed with calming colors that had a certain lightness to them, and on display were always tastefully arranged flowers that had been grown on the school grounds.

There was a piano at the end of the room, and a girl who knew how to play often performed songs there after being begged by her friends. The tune drifted over the spacious terrace and into the courtyard... Each time she came here, Amy thought it felt more like a fancy banquet hall than a school lounge.

Amy's friend giggled.

"Your mind is somewhere else today! Worrying about Tigger again?"

"You look like you'd rather be home with Portia, too, Rosalind."

"How could you tell?"

"Because I feel the same way!"

Amy's companion, laughing and raising her cup to her lips, was Rosalind, the daughter of the Earl of Knowles. Like Amy, she was fourteen. With brown hair, brown eyes, and features that were plain and rather indistinct, Rosalind wasn't a knock-out beauty, but she wasn't hideous either. Her height and figure were both very perfectly average. With no standout features to speak of, she was the personification of a wallflower.

Talking to her, however, revealed that she was a levelheaded, caring girl. Rosalind was the oldest daughter in her family with several younger siblings, but she got along surprisingly well with Amy, who was the youngest child herself.

Rosalind's eyes squinted into perfect lines when she laughed, which was a very familiar sight to Amy. Rosalind had been one of the first people Amy had been able to open up to without any reservation and become friends with.

It had been about a month since she started going to school, and in general, things had been going well.

The reason the two girls got to know each other was, naturally, because of cats. Everyone else at school knew the two girls were close friends, but they

hadn't actually met at school. They first met at the duchess's Cat Club.

Rosalind had started going to school almost six months before Amy, and she had been staying at the house of a family friend close by the Royal Academy. When Rosalind had gone out with the lady of the house on one of her days off, they stumbled across an injured cat.

The territory of the Earl of Knowles was an area lush with nature, and its local specialty was beef and dairy products. Rosalind was raised in that environment with a love for animals, so abandoning the small, ill-fated creature wasn't even an option in her mind. After all, cats could always be useful for catching mice that holed up in the feed shed.

A veterinarian rushed in to help the cat, and at his side was Amy, who was at the time training in healing magic and working as an assistant through the Cat Club. The injured cat was treated with Amy's magic and, after several days of observation at the veterinarian's office, was taken to the Duchess of Coverdale's estate.

The cat ended up there because, although she had been a little wary of people at first, she got used to them very quickly and showed no discomfort at being indoors, so they suspected she had been a domesticated house cat.

It was already common practice in the royal capital for owners looking for a lost cat to visit the duchess. So Rosalind entrusted the cat to her, hoping it could be reunited with its former owner.

But Rosalind's hopes were dashed. A month went by and no one had come looking for the cat, nor had anyone heard of someone looking for a missing cat. In the end, Rosalind, who had come back to visit her many times and had developed quite a bond with her, decided to adopt the cat herself.

The cat had bright orange fur and hazel eyes. She had a tabby patterning on her fur, but the stripes were more subtle. She had white patches at the base of her neck, at the ends of her legs, and on her belly. Like Rosalind, the cat wasn't showstopping, but she had an adorable face.

The cat was named Portia, and after she had made a full recovery, she started showing more of her mischievous side, which often grieved the lady of the house.

But eventually Portia, who did what she pleased and could whip out heartbreaking puppy-dog eyes at the drop of a hat, had everyone in the house wrapped around her paw. Portia was now considered an important member of the family.

“Oh, that’s right, Amy! That prototype toy with feathers you gave me the other day was a big hit with Portia!”

“I’m so glad! I thought she would like it because Tigger’s crazy about it. Does she have a preference for the color of the feathers?”

“No, not really. But if I could choose, I’d definitely make it the same shade of orange as Portia!”

“Then I’ll have to make mine black!”

“So it matches Tigger’s stripes!”

The two girls giggled and chattered on. They almost always talked about their cats. The topics that swirled around the other tables—gossip, trends in the royal capital, and prospects for their future husbands—were never brought up with these two.

A high-pitched voice suddenly interrupted their discussion of cats.

“Do you see that?! Eating sweets like a glutton...”

“Someone who can’t even control themselves around food isn’t fit to stand by Prince Edward’s side, if you ask me!”

“Really! Has she ever seen what she looks like in a mirror?!”

Amy stealthily glanced at the table next to theirs and saw three ladies wearing extravagant dresses. She had felt stares coming from them the entire time she had been sitting there. She didn’t recognize their faces, so she figured they must have just recently enrolled. There weren’t many girls at the Royal Academy, so Amy had quickly learned the names of the few dozen female students who attended.

Rosalind had been impressed by how quickly Amy had memorized their names, but this was nothing compared with the all-girls’ high school from her previous life, where her first-year class alone had around 150 students. Here

the girls even had a wide variety of hair and eye colors.

Their scornful gazes were also thrown at the tea set that had been placed on Amy and Rosalind's table.

The lounge doubled as a tearoom, so they could also get snacks like cakes or fruit on the side. Rosalind only had tea, but Amy had one of the caramelized nut-filled tarts in front of her. The tart had a plain appearance but had deceptively high calories, cocooned in a rich dough made from browned butter and jam-packed with caramel and nuts.

Four years had passed since that initial tea party, and Amy was still considered a fiancée candidate. In fact, she was the only fiancée candidate left. She knew there were aristocratic families and noble ladies who had reservations toward her for that reason alone. More than anything else, their attitude stemmed from the big difference in social status between the royal family and her father's rank—that of an earl.

"Can she even *dance* with such a heavy body?"

"What if she steps on her partner's feet?"

"She'd break his foot!"

Although Amy's rotund, almost sumo-esque figure of childhood was no more, she was still chubby and had round and pinchable cheeks. She understood the temptation these girls felt to say something mean about her, a chubby girl enjoying delicious food, especially when they were putting their hearts and souls into their strict diets.

Amy also agreed with them that everyone in the Luducian royal family should look beautiful. Edward was beautiful, so he should choose someone who looked equally so beside him if that's what his heart desired. Amy was in total agreement there.

She had almost gotten used to hearing the malicious gossip. It was a daily occurrence at this point, so it was almost no different from the chirping of the birds every morning.

"Well, they're not wrong," Amy muttered quietly, gazing in the distance and not looking hurt at all.

“Amy!” Rosalind chided, looking outraged on her behalf.

Amy thought the girls were probably annoyed they weren’t getting the reaction from her they were hoping for, because they continued bad-mouthing her loudly.

Amy had predicted that she would get rude remarks from the moment she decided to start gaining weight, but she had still been shocked the first time she heard it. She had frozen in place. The words had dripped with malice, and although the girls had been complaining about her position as the prince’s fiancée candidate—a position she never wanted in the first place—confused and resentful tears had sprung to her eyes.

After a while, however, she had come to realize that just because the girls couldn’t stomach “Amy, the prince’s fiancée candidate,” that didn’t necessarily mean they despised or resented Amy herself. She came to this conclusion because girls only said those things the first time they saw her, when they didn’t know enough about her nature to genuinely hate her.

What usually happened after that was that each time they would meet, they would dislike Amy less and less. Many times, they even started to become friends with her. In fact, none of the people who had been mean to her when she first started going to school were still gossiping about her today.

Because of these experiences, she decided it was most efficient to just let the mean words go in one ear and out the other, instead of getting upset every single time... But that didn’t mean it *completely* stopped hurting.

Besides, even if she had the perfect personality and perfect looks, it would be impossible for everyone in the world to like her. The naturally shy Amy much preferred having a small group of people she could confide in—like her family, Rosalind, and Tigger—over having a bunch of people just pretending to fawn over her. She didn’t have a case of sour grapes.

But she did feel sorry for Rosalind getting caught in the middle. She had to hear this silly gossiping just because she was having tea with Amy.

“I’m really sorry about this, Rosalind,” Amy whispered, leaning in close to her.

“You have nothing to apologize for! I mean, I don’t enjoy hearing my friend

being spoken so rudely of, but as long as you don't care, I won't pay it any mind either."

A voice suddenly rang out above their heads.

"Fancy seeing you two in a place like this..."

A beautiful lady had appeared behind Amy's and Rosalind's seats on the terrace. She was slightly out of breath, but she spoke with enough haughtiness that the dignity in her voice made it nearly unnoticeable.

The three girls who had just made the stinging remarks yelped as excited chatter broke out throughout the lounge.

"Wait, why is she here?!" one of the girls cried.

"No way! The daughter of Marquess Elphinstone!"

Before Amy had even turned around, Rosalind greeted her by name.

"Good afternoon, Letizia."

"I was just walking in the courtyard when I happened to see you two. How can you call yourself ladies and sit so close to the edge?! I wouldn't be able to look at you if you let your skin get sunburned!"

What a model of beautiful femininity! Amy thought, unable to keep her thoughts from spiraling with excitement. *Hiding her mouth with her lace fan, and that teasing look in her eye...! She's so stunning!*

Letizia, the daughter of Marquess Elphinstone, looked as though she had walked out of a classical portrait. She had a lovely face, with blue eyes like sapphires and shiny blonde natural ringlets. Her accessories were modest, but her oblong-silhouette-style dress was obviously expensive, and her heels were of the latest fashion.

Her long, slender figure towering above them was dignified and beautiful. She bore an eerie resemblance to a lead actor from an all-female musical theater group from Amy's previous life in Japan...

Elegance oozed from every pore, down to her fingertips, which she used to fold her fan up with a *snap*. Amy could almost imagine roses blossoming behind her, and she wasn't sure the sparkles she saw around Letizia were entirely due

to the sun filtering onto the terrace through the trees.



Sighs of admiration rose from the surrounding tables at the appearance of someone so beautiful.

Even the three girls at the table next to them were staring at Letizia with flushed cheeks and adoration in their eyes—the exact opposite of how they had just treated Amy.

“A teatime for two, is it? I’m glad you seem to be enjoying yourselves,” said Letizia coolly, looking down at Amy, Rosalind, and the plate of sweets.

The three girls from before laughed, thinking they were joining in some sort of mockery, but then—

“See, Amy! I was right thinking you girls would come here!” Letizia said jovially.

“You were! Rosalind said you would be able to find us.”

They were all so excited, they stood faster than the waiter could make it to them. Rosalind pulled out a chair for Letizia, and Amy gestured her hand to it, smiling.

*I’m sure she’s out of breath because she rushed over, thinking we were talking about **that** thing again... Not that she would admit it!*

Perhaps Amy’s thoughts were plain on her face, because Letizia stood for a moment, eyes darting between the thin-armed white chair and their faces as she fidgeted with her fan.

“Wh-What is it?!”

“Because you weren’t in class this morning, we peeked into Madam Tory’s class, too, didn’t we, Amy?”

“We did. But you weren’t there either. Then we figured you’d go to Sir Dion’s magic practicum for sure. So Rosalind said you’d probably be able to see us afterward if we sat here.”

“I-I didn’t go through the courtyard because I wanted to see you girls... I... You even went to Madam Tory’s...to look for me...,” Letizia mumbled, trailing off. Smiling eyes turned to her from around the lounge, some girls even nodding along with her.

“Really? That’s sad, Rosalind... It seems we were the only ones who wanted to hang out,” Amy teased.

“Don’t be so dejected, Amy! Letizia will definitely have tea with us. We were just in the middle of talking about the Kingdom of Bakr, after all. Isn’t that right, Letizia?”

“I-I guess I have no choice, do I? I’m very busy right now, you know, but...fine. We members of the Elphinstone family are very generous, after all.”

Clearing her throat with a small cough, Letizia sat in the chair, head downturned. Between the curtain of blonde ringlets shielding her face, Amy could see her cheeks burning crimson and her mouth twisted in a small smile.

The three girls sitting beside them watched, stunned, while Letizia regained her composure and told the waiter her order.

“I’ll have the same tart as Amy.”

“We’ll have matching tarts?!” Amy asked, excited.

Rosalind chuckled.

“Well, you *are* good friends!”

“Th-That’s not it!” Letizia stammered. “Cott nut is just really good for replenishing magical powers, that’s all! But in any case, shouldn’t you be eating more, Amy?”

Amy blinked for a moment, startled, before smiling widely.

“You’re very kind, Letizia.”

Amy had experienced being on the verge of collapsing from overusing her magic before. Letizia was probably just worried for her and was trying to prevent something like that from happening again.

When Amy met Letizia’s eyes and smiled so sincerely, the corners of Letizia’s eyes turned slightly pink, and she gulped, as if clearing her throat.

“W-Well, everyone’s worried about you! I-It’d just be a huge pain if you fainted or something during the practicum!”

“You’re right. Thank you. I’ll make sure to eat a lot.”

Rosalind, who had been watching the exchange fondly, addressed Letizia as if she were her younger sister, despite Letizia being a year older.

“It’s okay, Letizia. Amy’s on her second helping.”

“Oh... Well, that’s fine, then. Anyway, I told you to stop calling me Letizia. Or have you already forgotten?”

Amy and Rosalind looked at each other and smiled.

“*Okay, Letty,*” they said in unison.

As soon as Letizia noticed herself smiling at this, she quickly composed her expression again. Over her shoulder, the three girls were staring, mouths agape.

Letizia Elphinstone was immensely popular with the other ladies. She was the prime example of a girl who had come around and started being friendly with Amy after a rough start, and now she was one of Amy’s dear friends at school.

At the same time Letizia had told them to call her Letty, she also told them they didn’t need to speak formally or humbly with her.

Letizia was both older and had a higher family status, but it would have been more disrespectful not to listen to her request. She was the sort of person who, once she declared something, would not concede the point in any way. Amy had already had some experience with this type of personality from Edward and Alexander. However, it was Rosalind’s nature to speak politely to everyone, so she didn’t change her manner of speaking very much.

“So, you wanted to hear about the Kingdom of Bakr?” asked Letizia with a cough. Amy nodded.

“A ton of people from foreign kingdoms come to my grandfather’s territory, but rarely any from Bakr.”

“I imagine that would be true for Wallum.”

Bakr, a friendly kingdom to the south, was landlocked, so they traded primarily over land routes. Therefore, they didn’t have much to do with the border province Wallum, the cornerstone of sea trade.

Amy had only just started learning about geography and Luducia’s neighboring kingdoms at school, so she didn’t have much knowledge other than

what she learned from the books at her parents' house. But there were two things about Bakr she was desperately interested in.

"Books are nothing compared with your stories, Letty. I mean, you've actually lived there!" Amy effused.

The Marquess of Elphinstone held a position that was like a mixture of a diplomat and a foreign minister from Amy's previous life. The Kingdom of Bakr was a resource-rich country and a long-time, very important trading partner for Luducia. Furthermore, when the country welcomed the crown princess from Bakr, the marquess temporarily relocated to Bakr with his family to take on the burden of coordinating various aspects of the arrangement. When that obligation had finished, they returned to Luducia this past winter.

At the beginning of the year, Edward's oldest brother, the crown prince, had married the princess. When the dust had settled, Letizia started attending school. She began around the same time Amy did.

"It's hard to imagine from pictures alone a kingdom existing in the middle of a desert. Maybe it's like our pasture at Knowles, but with sand instead of grass..." Rosalind wondered aloud to herself.

Amy imagined that Bakr was a place similar to some of the countries in the Middle East in her previous life, but the only thing Rosalind could compare it to was the huge pasture on the Knowles territory. In this world, with its limited means of circulating images, it was quite difficult for the general population to comprehend the wider world around them.

"The Knowles pasture is quite big, but Bakr is much bigger," said Letizia. "I was shocked at how large it was the first time I visited. Even the sunlight and the wind are stronger there."

"Then I suppose their clothes would be different, too?"

"That's right. I was completely veiled from head to toe."

Amy and Rosalind tried to imagine Letizia wearing foreign clothing... She could probably wear anything and look stunning.

Amy was interested in the clothes worn in Bakr, but there was something else she really wanted Letizia to confirm for her first...

“Um...,” Amy started, leaning forward, “is it true that everyone in the kingdom likes cats?”

“Amy...that’s really what you want to know about the Kingdom of Bakr?” Letizia sounded slightly exasperated. She may have muttered “Unbelievable...” under her breath, but she answered Amy’s question nevertheless. “Well, it’s true. Even the king likes them. There were cats all over the royal palace.”

“Really?!” Amy squealed. “What about you, Letty? Didn’t you have any cats there?”

She had read all about the cat lovers of Bakr in a book. They seemed to be partial to cats for a variety of reasons—partly because the kingdom’s founder cherished his cats, and partly because they were considered a sign of good luck in their religion.

Amy’s imagination went crazy, she was so excited that the hearsay had been true. What were their lives like? What types of cats lived in Bakr? What color fur did they have? What did their tails look like? What names did they have? What food did they eat? Cats were generally the same everywhere you went, but there was still so much Amy wanted to know.

“I did have a cat when I lived in Bakr...but I couldn’t take her back with me, so when I returned to Luducia, I left her behind,” Letizia said simply, bringing her teacup to her mouth. The other two were at a loss for words.

“Oh my word, Letty...”

“That’s so sad...”

Letizia noticed tears slowly welling up in Amy’s eyes, and the teacup in her hand began to tremble slightly. Letizia’s behavior and composure were always perfect, so this was unusual.

“W-Wait, why are *you* crying, Amy?!”

“B-Because...you h-had to...leave him...!”

If I had to live apart from Tigger...

Just imagining it gave her sharp chest pains. Amy clutched at her pendant necklace and really began to cry in earnest.

The tears streamed down Amy's face and fell onto the tablecloth. Rosalind tried to stem the flow with a handkerchief.

Letizia hastily added an explanation.

"The climate is just completely different here! What would I do if I forced her to come with me and she got sick here or something?"

"I-I guess you're right...but still..."

"And anyway, it's not as though I left her with a total stranger. I still receive letters nearly every week telling me how she's been doing!" Letizia said, shiftily looking away.

With Amy's vision clouded by tears, it was Rosalind who noticed that the tips of Letizia's ears, half-obscured by her shiny ringlets, were blushing scarlet.

"Letty, did you leave her with Prince Jahal, by any chance?"

"Th-That's right. As you were well aware, I'm sure."

"Ah—Letty's princely fiancé!"

"He is *not*, Amy! He's the only one going around saying we're engaged!"

The Kingdom of Bakr was formed by the union of multiple smaller kingdoms, so there were several royal families. Prince Jahal was the Second Prince of one of these smaller kingdoms. He was also the cousin of Princess Sameen, the princess who had married the First Prince of Luducia.

If you tried to apply Luducia's organization of nobility to Bakr, Princess Sameen's family was like the main branch of the royal family, whereas Prince Jahal's family was an offshoot, like a duke.

In Luducia, it wasn't especially uncommon for a member of the royal family to marry someone from a foreign kingdom.

Although the current crown prince's marriage was a political marriage, he had spoken with Princess Sameen since they were children, so it was also like a marriage between childhood friends. Their wedding had been a very quiet affair, with the jovial bard only singing songs of blessing.

By contrast, Prince Jahal had fallen head-over-heels in love with Letizia at first

sight, courted her passionately and aggressively, and had half-forced the marquess to give Jahal his blessing to marry her.

Jahal urged Letizia to marry him right then and there, but her father reversed course and argued that, with Jahal being younger than her, they could still afford some time before the marriage, so he wanted to give Letizia a chance to experience school life in her home kingdom at least once.

Jahal's father, the king, often visited Luducia and was famous for his incredible good looks. It was reported that Jahal took after his father, and Jahal's older brother resembled their mother, who was also a renowned beauty.

For the people of Luducia, the engagement between the (presumably) handsome prince of Bakr to a Luducian lady proud of her country was a popular topic of conversation, even immortalized in a novel making the rounds in the castle town—*The Pushy Prince and the Lovely Lady: A Love Story*.

“After overcoming misunderstandings and wicked schemes plotted against them, two lovers declared their love for each other in the country of sand... Now they find themselves in kingdoms leagues apart, though united under the same sky. They awake from dreams of each other to pillows wet with tears... What will happen when they finally meet again? Find out in the next volume!”

That was how the book was described, at least, but it was purely fiction. From what Letizia had told them, her parents had given their blessing, but she hadn't actually agreed to the engagement yet.

Not that it mattered much in the grand scheme of things—just as aristocratic ladies often had no say in their marriage partners, their parents' decision was the only thing that mattered. That was why the engagement was already viewed as settled, with or without Letizia's approval.

“Er...he's not holding your cat hostage, is he?” Amy asked.

“No, not at all. I asked him to take care of her. He was the one who gave her to me in the first place.”

“Oh my!”

“In that case...”

“Wh-What?! I-I mean, he gave her to me totally out of the blue, even though I’d never had an animal before. It was really hard at first!”

Amy and Rosalind had assumed that Jahal’s affection had been unrequited, but when Letizia flushed as she spoke, it didn’t seem like it had been altogether unwelcome. Letizia, overwhelmed but trying her best to dote on the cat given to her by her fiancé... Just imagining it made for an adorable picture.

Whether her friends married for love or politics, Amy at least hoped they could approve of the man and marry him with genuine smiles on their faces. Amy had been raised as a noblewoman in this world, too, but she still wished for that above all else.

“It’s a love united by cats, isn’t it?” said Rosalind.

“That’s so wonderful, Rosalind!” Amy gushed. “And—oh my goodness—Letty would be a white cat and the prince would be a black cat!”

Amy thought of everyone in terms of what they would look like as cats. It was typical of her to forget about humans entirely when cats were involved.

“Wait a minute, you two!” Letizia protested, her face bright red. More and more of the ladies in the lounge were listening in with gentle smiles on their faces. The three girls next to their table were spellbound, hands pressed together at their chests.

Letizia, the dignified lady who had served as a model for a popular novel, typically only acted this flustered in private, in front of her friends... It was an incredibly rare yet adorable sight for the rest of the students present.

Some also felt a certain sense of jealousy toward Amy and Rosalind, who were able to draw out these feelings from Letizia, but they were just passing pangs.

“W-Well, anyway...we shouldn’t be talking about that stuff here.”

“Oh! Well, then why don’t you come over to my house during the next school vacation? Tigger’s a little shy of new people, but he’s a really good kitty.”

“Portia, too! She’s a little naughty, but she’s really friendly and cute!”

“Well, my Mimi’s fur is so luxurious and elegant!”

Letizia, wanting to brag about her own cat, accidentally got dragged back into the conversation. Amy's eyes lit up at the cat's name.

"Your cat's name is Mimi? That's so cute! Who gave her that name?"

"Erm... Um, well..."

"That would be me," came a voice suddenly from behind them.

Amy and Rosalind jumped, scrambled for each other's hands, and turned around.

A young man stood behind them, his entire body shrouded in exotic white clothing. He wore a headscarf made from the same fabric, which was fastened in place with a black ring.

For a brief moment, Amy was reminded of the clothing people would wear in some Middle Eastern countries.

He had slightly tanned skin and sharp black eyes that sparkled with powerful determination. Amy could tell he was younger than them from his height and facial features, but there wasn't a trace of childish weakness or immaturity in his dignified attitude.

Amy's memory of the opening image from that past-life otome game would never fade, and there was no doubt in her mind that this boy was one of the characters in it—

"Prince Jahal! What are you doing here?!"

It's really him?! But...it can't be!

Amy sat in silence, stewing in her confusion. Jahal turned to the similarly flustered Letizia and grinned. Then, in a smooth, fluid movement, Jahal took her hand and pressed it to his lips. The girls in the lounge, unable to contain themselves, cheered and shouted with joy.

"Mimi is receiving the best care at my home. You can come see her whenever you'd like, Letty. Like right now, for instance."

"Wh-What!?"

Letizia's blush had crept down to her neck, and she had started trembling. To

drive the point home, Jahal leaned in, bringing his face very close to hers.

“If I knew you missed her so much, I would have brought her along. But...I *am* a little jealous.”

Letizia opened her mouth, but no sounds came out.

Although he was supposed to be whispering sweetly into her ear, Amy and Rosalind could hear it clearly from the other side of the table.

Does the Bakr royal family have especially sonorous vocal cords or something? Amy wondered. *But...that reminds me...the characters in that game had voices, too...*

Maybe I should have played more of the audio back then..., Amy thought, trying to escape from the romantic scene in front of her.

There had been one other thing Amy wanted to learn about the Kingdom of Bakr other than their feelings on cats—and that was whether a prince from Bakr was one of the romanceable characters from her otome game.

She'd thought the character was likely someone from Bakr based on the clothing she could remember him wearing in the illustration and on the close trade relationship between Bakr and Luducia. From their ages, she had guessed the romanceable character would be either Prince Jahal or his older brother. It had been said they looked quite different physically, so Amy figured she'd probably be able to tell if she got the chance to see one of them.

Pictures were not yet widespread, and portraits were not always credible depictions of the subject. Amy had been hoping to hear from Letizia about Prince Jahal's specific features—she had no idea he would show up completely out of the blue.

Seeing was believing. Prince Jahal was almost certainly the character from her otome game.

But oddly enough, the love interest standing in front of her did not want the heroine—he wanted Letizia. Even Amy, who was aware that she didn't know much about love, was able to confidently draw that conclusion from such an overt display of affection.

This finally breaks the pattern of the “game,” doesn’t it? But...

As Amy’s mind returned to reality, her eyes met Letizia’s. Letizia was staring at her, begging for a way out.

Amy couldn’t help feeling sympathetic for Letizia, who had tears in her eyes from receiving such an embarrassing surprise in front of so many people. But Amy didn’t have the faintest idea what she could do to help her out.

On that afternoon, the terrace looked the same as it had every other afternoon, but the reality of the matter was totally different. Amy and Rosalind still had not moved an inch from where they had frozen, clutching each other’s hands.

“And are you two Letty’s friends?” Prince Jahal asked, turning toward them and smiling.

“Y-Yes, that’s right!” they said rather awkwardly before being properly introduced by Letizia.

Jahal pulled out one of the vacant chairs for himself and sat down right beside his fiancée. By the time beverages had been brought over to him, the room finally became quiet again.

From what Amy could remember of the otome game, there were five main romanceable characters. The slightly gloomy “prince” character was Edward, and the seemingly proud “noble” character was Alexander. Amy hadn’t found contenders for the “magician” or “knight” characters yet, but the “prince from a foreign kingdom” character was almost certainly Prince Jahal.

Even as the tips of Letizia’s ears turned red under Jahal’s scorching gaze, she managed to recover her senses and turned to him.

“What brings you to Luducia so suddenly, Prince Jahal?”

“I was thinking of participating in this year’s athletic tournament and study abroad while I’m here.”

Luducia’s athletic tournament was held once every three years, and the matches were graced with the presence of His Majesty the King. It was a massive event in Luducia, during which knights and magicians from far and wide

would participate in contests of skill and valor.

Participation was not limited by age or rank, and contest winners were given money or promotional advancements in the Order of Knights or the Order of Magicians. With these prizes, skilled fighters of all social ranks took part in the tournament—nobleman and commoner alike.

Amy's older brother Harold had participated in the previous athletic tournament and had finished with decently good results. Choosing the path of an adventurer with such good results was very out of the ordinary, but her brother was never one to follow the crowd.

"Wha— I didn't hear about that!" Letizia exclaimed. "Also, you have to be fourteen to start going to school here!"

"I'll be fourteen on my next birthday."

"Isn't that next year...?" Letizia asked, putting a hand to her forehead.

Special circumstances were often made for members of royalty from foreign kingdoms who wanted to study abroad in Luducia, as the situation was affected by international politics. Jahal flashed her a smile and said his application to become an auditing student had been accepted.

"The way you described this school in your letters sounded so fun, I just couldn't help myself."

"You what...?" Letizia asked weakly.

"Amy and Rosalind...," said Jahal, finally turning his attention to the other two girls at the table. "I've seen those names written in letters so many times this past month, it feels as if I've met you already. Don't feel like you have to humble yourself to me," he added.

Amy and Rosalind sat there stunned, mouths hanging open. They thought they had become friends with Letizia, but they had no idea she liked them enough to mention them in her letters!

"Letty...mentioned us? That makes me so happy!" Amy cried.

"Only once in a while! There wasn't much else to write about, you know!"

"Really? But in every letter, you'd talk about them so—"

“Jahal!” she yelled, putting her hand over his mouth.

Letizia blushed such a deep red that Amy almost expected steam to start coming out of her ears. Even behind Letizia’s hand, Jahal was clearly smiling from ear to ear. To a casual observer, they would look like a normal couple joking around with each other.

Even Amy’s and Rosalind’s eyes softened at the sight, and although it was rather rude, being in the presence of a prince, they busied themselves with drinking from their teacups... With all this sweetness around them, they were rather glad they hadn’t added any sugar to their tea.

When Letizia’s blush abated, Rosalind cautiously began to speak.

“Your Highness...pardon me for speaking out of place, but did you come here on your own?”

Royalty was always accompanied by guards, even within the Royal Academy. The guards were very considerate toward the other students and the teachers’ classes—royalty was protected so unobtrusively that the guards were almost undetectable. This was common knowledge, so everyone knew Rosalind wasn’t talking about Prince Jahal’s guards.

“Yes. Edward and Alexander were supposed to show me around the school, but then I saw Letizia and came here.”

“Jahal!” Letizia said. “Does that mean they’re looking for you right now?”

“That’s not a problem. My guard will get in touch with them.”

He was probably right about that, but saying so showed a lack of concern—or perhaps lack of fear—typical of a royal. The royal Amy was closest to, Edward, never acted that way... She became keenly aware that, despite being in similar positions in life, the two were actually quite different.

Letizia pressed down on her temples, her headache seemingly unrelenting. Looking at her, Amy quietly hoped she could have a quiet, relaxing night after this.

“A-All right, then...,” said Letizia. “Moving around will only lead to more searching, so why don’t you just stay here until they find you?”

“That was my plan! Now, open up, Letty.” Jahal promptly took a piece of tart with his fork and brought it to Letizia’s mouth.

Letizia became even more flustered.

“I-I can feed myself!”

The prince looked like he was having the time of his life, but Letizia looked like she would drown in an ocean of sugar if he showed her any more affection. This time when Letizia appealed to Amy with tearful eyes, Amy thought for a bit before picking up a fork herself.

“All right, Rosalind! Open wide!”

Rosalind snorted quietly. “Only from you, Amy. All right, then.”

Rosalind opened her mouth, and Amy quickly slipped the tart inside.

Hands pressed against her cheeks, Rosalind closed her naturally narrow eyes even more as she grinned and ate. Then, Rosalind took a piece of tart with her own fork and held it out to Amy. Amy opened her mouth wide and ate it as if it were the most normal, unromantic thing in the world.

The cott nuts covered in sweet caramel had a nice chewiness to them. Amy would’ve still liked them even if they didn’t replenish magical power. The dough on the outside was also light and crumbly with a nice buttery flavor. She couldn’t find a single fault with the aroma or the texture. The pastry chef at the Royal Academy was very talented.

“Oh my goodness, it’s so sweet and yummy!”

“Isn’t it?”

Amy, still smiling from the divine taste of the tart, inadvertently met the gazes of the three girls beside them, who had still been sneaking glances over to their table.

For a moment, the three girls started in surprise and blushed. Then, for some reason, they hastily put down their cups and fans and started feeding each other, too. One by one, the other female students in the lounge followed suit.

It was the kind of strange situation in which, when enough people do something, it becomes strange *not* to do that thing.

Letting out a laugh, Jahal once again offered the tart to Letizia.

“Here—you too, Letty.”

“...Just one bite, okay?”

Letizia put the tart into her mouth in one graceful movement, yet with dazzling speed. After she bent her head slightly to swallow it, she picked up her tea as if nothing had happened.

“What about me?” asked Jahal.

“There’s nothing for you!”

“All right, then. Time for another bite, Letty!”

“Amy, help me out!” Letizia pleaded.

“...What are you doing?” came another voice, crashing into the table and scattering the romantic atmosphere.

“Oh—Alec!” said Amy.

Alec came up to the terrace from the courtyard and sighed. Amy shrugged and smiled appreciatively. After knowing him for four years, Amy knew very well that when all was said and done, he was a very caring person.

Alexander, now eighteen, was rapidly beginning to look like the perfect aristocrat. His stark blond hair was so dazzling, it was almost painful to see, and there was slightly more color to his blue-gray eyes. He had grown into a conventional beauty, one that reminded Amy of the princes from the picture books she used to read in her previous life.

Behind Alexander with his furrowed brows, Amy saw Edward, smiling and looking a little embarrassed.

“We’ve been looking for you, Jahal.”

“Ed. Alec. I’ll apologize for all the trouble it took to find me. But you can’t really blame me—my priority here is Letty, after all.”

“I thought you’d say that,” sighed Edward. Then he smiled and added, “Hello, Amy.”

Amy almost choked on her tea at his dazzling smile, but somehow she

managed to swallow it and return a nod of greeting.

Ed had always been tall for his age, but he had grown even taller, and now there was a considerable difference in height between them. But Edward had never shirked his sword training, so he wasn't lanky or weak. He still gave off a calm, quiet energy, but at some point, a fire had been lit behind his silvery-gray eyes.

His aura of nobility was still alive and well, and he and Alexander, who made polar opposite impressions—one dynamic motion and the other serene stillness—were two of the most popular people at school.

According to Amy's father, the director of technology at the Institute of Magic, Edward was quite talented. He had continued attending Joshua's lectures on magical tools, which had evolved into joint research sessions. Edward participated in the development and improvement of magical tools, and although Joshua had still not given his blessing for a betrothal to his daughter, he seemed to highly value Edward's abilities and accomplishments.

Edward's schedule was jam-packed with his official engagements and his studies, so Amy usually still communicated with him through letters sent by owl post. She frequently visited the riding grounds, which she had been given free access to, but she rarely spent time with Edward there, typically only seeing him in person once or twice a month.

She had assumed that when he entered school, his social circle would grow, and he would meet other ladies. Then, he'd be able to find an appropriate fiancée. But to this day, there had been no indication of that happening.

Amy and Edward had exchanged letters almost daily, and they had continued that practice even now. And when they happened to see each other in school or found themselves in a class together, Edward would always come talk to her.

But Amy was still in the ambiguous position of fiancée candidate, having been neither decided on nor rejected and removed from the running. She felt like they needed to sit down and have a proper conversation about the subject, but she was afraid to ask... On that day on the riding grounds, he had told her, "I want to be friends." She had repeated those words over and over again and carried them engraved in her heart.

More chairs were brought over for the new arrivals, and the all-star lineup of royalty and aristocracy made the terrace look almost like a stage.

It was rare for public figures to gather like this, and they realized uncontrollable cheers and stares were directed at them from all over.

The attention was coming not only from the ladies in the lounge but also from the male students at the end of the courtyard. Amy wished she had been sitting with the spectators, instead... She only prayed she would look hazy beside the glare of the dazzling auras of those around her.

“Jahal, couldn’t you at least go the first day without making a commotion?”

“I’m just sitting here quietly having some tea, Alec!”

“Um... Do you want something to eat, Alec?” asked Amy, holding out a piece of tart, thinking that he looked tired.

“Not now, Amy,” he said.

“In that case...”

Thin, hard, long fingers wound around her soft wrist and redirected the fork.

Amy made a noise of surprise as Edward ate the tart off the tip of her utensil. The cheers around them grew distinctly louder, and even the waiter who came to serve them staggered a bit.

“E-Ed!”

“Hm?” he asked, chewing and looking pleased with himself. At that moment, her heart started banging against the walls of her chest.

“L-Letty! You were right—this is really embarrassing!”

“It’s a bit late for that now, Amy!”

Although several royals and high-ranking aristocrats were seated at the table, there was an amicable feeling to the group. Edward and Alec had never been so plainly presented with such a relaxed, friendly environment at school. But this had all changed one month ago, with the enrollment of one female student.

The three girls sitting beside them did not start showering compliments on Amy’s appearance, but, not thirty minutes later, they *were* starting to change

their initial impressions of her.

Intermission: Achoo!

ONE afternoon, in a corner of the expansive garden of the Northlands' royal capital estate, the gardener Rob and the butler Claude were discussing different plants, when suddenly— “Oh, Tigger!” said Rob, looking up at the young mistress's cat napping comfortably on a wide branch of an oak tree. “Going to house-sit from there again today?”

It was a pleasant time of the year, neither too warm nor too cold. A soft breeze rustled the leaves, and it sounded like a lullaby.

“He sure looks comfortable, napping up there,” said Claude.

Rob laughed.

“Watching him sleep almost makes me want to put down these pruning shears and have a little siesta myself.”

As Claude nodded and rolled up the ledger in his hand, he watched the roundness of Tigger's back rise and fall softly. The sight of his long fur gently waving in the breeze made his eyelids feel heavy... It was probably not the best thing to see in the middle of the workday.

Just as Claude was about to look away, Tigger, eyes still closed, suddenly itched at his face, and then...

Achoo!

The cat jumped up, startled by his own sneeze, and looked around with eyes that were perfect circles. His golden gaze finally landed on the two men under the tree and transformed into an annoyed glare as he drew his own conclusions about what had just happened. Then he settled his legs under his chest and shut his eyes once more.

“Tigger, we're not the ones who woke you up!” said Claude.

Rob laughed again.

“I don't think we'll be winning any arguments with him.”

For Tigger to sneeze out of the blue like that... Miss Amy must be talking about him right now at school.

And with that, the two men returned to their discussion of gardening.

Chapter 11: In the Lounge

AFTER the commotion brought on by the new arrivals, the group on the terrace continued chatting casually with one another. Letizia suddenly remembered their conversation from before, about the athletic tournament.

“Prince Jahal, are you really going to participate?”

Military arts were very popular in the Kingdom of Bakr, and the royal family in particular valued swordsmanship, so it wasn’t strange for Prince Jahal to want to participate. However, even if the tournament had no age restrictions, physical strength and magical power only increased with age. Jahal’s youth would be a handicap in a competition where almost all the participants were adults.

That was the reasoning for Letizia’s question, but Jahal quickly replied with some unexpected information.

“Of course! Ed and Alec said they were going to participate, too.”

“What?” Amy asked, taken aback.

Ed had never shared those plans with her—not in his letters, nor when they had met in person the other day. Amy’s head swiveled over to him. He smiled guiltily, as if apologizing for the sudden news.

“I never meant to keep it a secret from you... I just forgot to mention it.”

He explained that it was customary for male members of the Luducian royal family to take part in the athletic tournament while they were in school, and that even his older brothers had in the past.

But that had been many years ago, and Amy had never come to watch the tournaments except when her brother, Harold, had participated in one, so she’d been ignorant of this custom.

“I may not be as strong as my older brothers or Harold, but I don’t plan to be

easily beaten.”

“But, Ed, what if you get hurt...?”

Edward’s eldest brother, the First Prince, was famous for being talented both academically and physically, and his second older brother, the Second Prince, was a captain of the Knights of the Royal Guard. Compared with those two, Amy wasn’t sure how she was supposed to stay calm.

She knew that even though he was royalty—no, *because* he was royalty—Edward had been required to cultivate his swordsmanship and magic skills. But she just couldn’t imagine it—he never acted rough or aggressive around her at all.

He tried gently assuaging her fears, but there were real fights in the athletic tournament, and they produced their fair share of injuries. Even if he told her not to worry, she couldn’t sit there perfectly at ease, just like she couldn’t for Harold’s matches.

“Seriously, stop worrying,” Alec told Amy. “We may not look it, but Ed and I are pretty skilled, you know. Besides, even if anything happens, there will be healing magicians ready and waiting... Wait, will you be healing, too, Amy?”

“Oh! Yes, I will,” said Amy, confirming Alec’s astute prediction. “Just before this, actually, Sir Dion asked me to help out in the first-aid room this year.”

“Well, then!” said Edward. “In that case, I can participate with much more peace of mind.”

“Ed, that’s all the more reason why you *shouldn’t* get hurt!”

No matter how well Amy could treat injuries, that didn’t mean she wanted him to get hurt. Although she spoke very seriously, a smile still lingered on Edward’s face.

“I’ve heard you’ve gotten very good at healing magic, Amy,” said Letizia, looking a little proud. “It’s rare to be able to do healing magic at your age at all.”

Not only did learning healing magic involve a high degree of difficulty compared with other forms of magic, but performing it consumed massive

amounts of magical power, so most people learned it only after becoming adults. It was not common for children to be able to do it.

Prince Jahal looked impressed, but Amy was more pleased with being complimented by Letizia. She smiled and nodded.

“Did you start practicing on your own?” Prince Jahal asked.

“Yes. I wanted to get a cat.”

“A cat?”

Oh, shoot! I accidentally told the truth!

Amy had started learning magic to be able to get a cat, but she knew that was a strange, incomprehensible reason to undertake such a feat for most other people. She quickly adjusted her answer to her usual “PR” reason.

“Uh—no—it’s just...my older brother’s an adventurer and gets lots of injuries, so I wanted to be able to heal him.”

“Ah...I see. I’ve heard rumors of ‘Luducia’s Dual-Wielding Swordsman.’ Harold Northland is your older brother, then?”

“You know about him already?” Amy asked, eyes widening. “I’m so honored!”

She had no idea Harold’s reputation had even reached the royal family of a foreign kingdom. At the mention of Harold’s name, Alec’s eyes lit up and he leaned forward.

“Whereabouts is Hal now?”

Alec had always dreamed of becoming an adventurer, but his high social status had prevented him from being able to go out to dungeons or other magical beast habitats. His reality was limited to only hearing stories of hunts from others. But if he were not the son of a duke, Alec had once told her, he would probably put more effort into his magic and sword training in the hopes of joining Harold’s party.

“He could be in a foreign kingdom, for all I know,” said Amy, shrugging. Harold did things on his own time and relished his life as an adventurer. The last time she had heard from him was before she had even started going to school.

“So he hasn’t changed much, I take it?” asked Edward. “Are your parents worried?”

“They’re optimistic. ‘No news is good news,’ they say.”

Harold (who hadn’t visited their parents in a while, either), was traveling the world hunting monsters with his old friends from school, Gilbert and Nicholas. They weren’t ordinary travelers, however. Guilds were responsible for adventurers, and there were guild branches in every kingdom. So if adventurers came to a kingdom to hunt down magical beasts, all efforts were made to keep their immigration process simple and their stay convenient. Many adventurers simply wandered from kingdom to kingdom.

From the stories Amy had occasionally heard, Harold’s party was apparently quite good, and they were steadily improving their standing and reputation. And from the letters and packages that *would* be sent to Amy and her family (which typically arrived out of the blue), it seemed Harold had gotten used to his nomadic life. They could also always get in touch with him directly by contacting the guild to find out the address of where he was staying and where he had previously been.

For those reasons, neither her parents nor her grandfather were that concerned.

In Wallum particularly, it was very common for people to go out to sea for many months at a time, so they were used to enduring long stretches without a family member.

But there was actually one other reason for Harold’s travels besides hunting—he was looking for another party member.

Their party consisted of only the three of them—Harold, who specialized in dual-wielding blades; Gilbert, a spearman; and Nicholas, who used a crossbow. To make up for the members they lacked, they would solicit help on a temporary basis from each locale they visited.

They weren’t lacking in offensive power, but Harold had been saying for quite a while how much he wanted a regular healer who could double as support. Both Harold and Nicholas could use magic, but unlike Amy, neither was good at healing.

With such a well-known reputation, there were lots of people who wanted to join his party, but the requirements Harold demanded of the new member were so hard to achieve, none of the temporary fill-ins stuck around.

The real reason behind Harold's high expectations was from the game he used to play in his previous life. He played his hunter character with someone who was an incredible support. He didn't know the person in real life, though. They just happened to meet each other online when they were both solo, and every once in a while, they would team up and help each other out.

Although the person's avatar was a cute catgirl, they were at the highest level possible in the game. They could set predictive traps with startling accuracy, and they were great with their weapon, too. They were also really good at finding out the location of an enemy and often came across high-ranking monsters.

The player wasn't the friendliest or most talkative person, but they never cheated when it came to reliably providing support or incredible healing skills when Harold most needed them. Despite their straightforward playstyle, Harold was so impressed after hunting with this frighteningly talented support player that he begged them to become his teammate on the spot.

A memory flashed in Amy's head of her past-life older brother's excitement as he had screamed, "I just found a support *GOD!*"

In their last conversation on the in-game chat, the player had mentioned that they couldn't come on for a while because they were getting busy with real-life stuff. Harold started complaining around the house that the support player had suddenly stopped showing up in the game.

Those were some of the last of Amy's past-life memories.

Amy couldn't remember if the player eventually came back or if things ended there, but there was no doubt in her mind that Harold was using them as the basis for his ideal support member.

Looking for a good party member was important for an adventurer, but there was no guarantee Harold would find someone as good as that in this world. And if such a talented person *did* exist, they would have probably joined up with another party already.

Harold knew this, but he couldn't just give up. So he wandered from kingdom to kingdom, searching for an encounter like that in this life.

Gilbert and Nicholas were being dragged along with him on this quest, but they didn't seem to mind, which was a relief. Amy thought Harold got more than lucky enough with his two friends, who kept her careless and reckless brother company and could fight alongside him.

Well, I suppose Harold should keep searching until he's found some peace of mind, at least. And I'll chase after my dreams, too!

According to her mother, this life was their precious second chance at things.

Although the image of the otome game would still flicker in her mind from time to time, Amy now felt much more capable of looking past it toward her real-life future. She had worked hard to learn magic these past four years all in the name of getting a cat, but she also did it to put distance between herself and the otome game.

She assisted a veterinarian through the duchess' Cat Club, and she went to visit the riding grounds and animal pens at the royal castle to see the animals. Through these activities, Amy came into contact with more people, and little by little, she had gained confidence and a sense of belonging in this world.

And at the end of the day, she would always have Tigger when she went home.

There was no substitute for the time she would spend with her beloved cat—it calmed her immensely. Even the briefest moment with him could completely free her mind from the chains of worrying about the otome game or villainess novels.

But I can't let my guard down just yet..., Amy thought, looking around at the three men in front of her and letting out a small, quiet sigh.

Beside her, Rosalind was telling Prince Jahal stories of healing magic that had been performed on Portia and other animals.

"Outstanding... Then, if I get injured during the tournament, I'll leave my medical care to Amy, too!"

“Oh! Of course,” said Amy. “But I really hope I won’t have any injuries to heal.”

“That’s right. Amy just used up too much of her power recently.”

“That’s not it, Letty! I was just a little hungry.”

Even students at the Royal Academy sometimes got injuries from their magic and swordsmanship practicums.

If the injury wasn’t serious enough to warrant a visit to the doctor’s office, many times Amy would heal them if she was nearby, but even a small one would chip away at her magical power. And if a lot of students had gotten injured, it would be taxing indeed...

“That’s not true!” Letizia retorted. “You were so pale you looked like you were about to faint!”

“But Amy’s healing magic is so effective and comfortable, I can see why people would come to her for help,” Rosalind pointed out.

“Really?” Amy asked, tilting her head. “I don’t understand it myself.”

It was usually difficult to compare healing magic done from one person to the next. Healing magic partially accelerates a person’s own powers of recovery. But in exchange for quickness, the process left the patient with fatigue and physical weariness.

But Rosalind explained that Amy’s healing magic didn’t have those side effects.

“I don’t get really tired after you do healing magic on me. I actually feel better afterward.”

“I wonder if it’s just a coincidence...,” Amy mused aloud.

Being able to invoke healing magic at her age was rare, but there was some precedent of it happening in the past in families with particularly high magical aptitude.

Amy’s case, however, was a little different.

Her abilities alone were growing at a rate to outpace the kingdom’s head

magical doctor, but she also possessed a rare healing ability. This power had already been sensed by animals, like Tigger, but the first human to pick up on it was Sir Dion. When Amy had used her healing magic on him one day during her training, he had sensed a faint but distinct different form of magic at play.

The powers of healing were often said to be a blessing from the spirits.

A person who was said to have received this blessing and could heal wielded strong religious and political influence, so they were desired by a variety of institutions. Even in Luducia, the royal palace, magical institutions, medical institutions, and religious temples each wanted to win over Amy for themselves.

Amy was currently Edward's fiancée candidate, but because that hadn't progressed, it was very likely she would soon be receiving offers of marriage from royals and prominent aristocrats from Luducia and other foreign kingdoms, and they might be more heavy-handed about things.

If that happened, she would have to stop going to school, and her life would completely change—and she wasn't even an adult yet. Her mother, her father, and Sir Dion worried about what might become of her.

Fortunately, at this point, only those with incredibly high magical power, like Sir Dion, were able to discern these special healing powers. After he had discussed the matter with her grandfather, the Margrave of Wallum, they had jointly agreed to keep it concealed from everyone for the time being, including Amy herself.

"Oh! I have to get going soon," said Rosalind, glancing at the clock hanging on the wall.

She gently returned her cup to the table, pulled over her bag with her textbooks and writing utensils, and started getting together her things.

"Is it that time already?! I'm sorry, Rosalind. You should have been practicing instead of hanging out with me..."

"It's fine, Amy! Don't worry about it."

Amy's shoulders slumped dejectedly. Rosalind gave her a very older-sister-like exasperated look and patted her head.

“Practice?” Edward asked.

“For my music recital, Your Highness.”

Edward and Alexander exchanged looks of comprehension.

In music classes, each student learned their chosen instrument under the tutelage of a professor, and then at the end of the course they would perform in front of a large crowd of people to earn their course credits.

A recital was held at the school chapel once every two months. The music was usually rather good, and with viewing open to school alumni, parents, and guardians, it was always a popular event.

Jahal expressed interest in this, too.

“So there are recitals here, huh? What instrument will you play, then?”

“I’ll be playing the violin. I had planned on doing an ensemble with one of the piano students, but she suddenly became unable to come to the recital.”

The students were free to choose their performance style, but they usually joined up with others to perform in an ensemble or found someone to be their accompanist. Rosalind had been in the same class as her partner and practiced with her many times, but the girl had a sudden death in the family the week before and had taken a leave of absence from school to return home.

Rosalind had received an expedited letter that explained that she probably wouldn’t be able to return in time for the performance, but she hoped Rosalind could find another person to take her place.

“The performance is so close that it would be difficult to find someone else or change the piece,” Rosalind explained. “So I was hoping to ask the teacher if I could postpone my recital to the next time it’s held, or maybe later.”

“I see,” said Prince Jahal. “Do you not play any instrument, Amy?”

“I learned some when I was little, but now...”

“Tigger gets jealous,” Edward added cheerfully. Alexander nodded alongside him.

“Tigger?”

“My cat. Whenever I try to practice an instrument, Tigger just gets in the way, and I end up not being able to play.”

It may have sounded annoying, but Amy didn’t look bothered by it at all.

Tigger would jump up on the keys and use all his feet to play beautiful chords whenever she tried to play the piano.

When she started learning the violin, he got annoyed by the movements of the bow and would bat his paws at it like it was a cat toy.

When she played the flute, he would meow alongside the music and climb all over her, begging to be held.

Tigger only behaved this way when Amy was playing music. When Isabelle or someone else would play, he would sit there listening to them as quiet as a lamb.

So Amy had given up on instruments and specialized in listening instead. Even the music classes she picked out were not practical learning, but appreciation—music history, mainly.

“Is that right? That’s pretty annoying,” said Jahal.

“Well, it’s fine because he’s so cute.”

Jahal grinned. Lost in thoughts about Tigger, Amy squeezed her hands together over her chest and smiled. She could go on forever about cats, even if she was talking to a foreign royal she had just met for the first time.

“So what song are you playing?” Jahal asked Rosalind.

“Oh! It’s...”

Rosalind told Jahal the name of the song. It was quite a difficult piece, but it was a famous song that everyone had heard before.

“Oh!” exclaimed Edward, turning to his childhood friend. “Don’t you know how to play that song, Alec?”

“Oh, wow!” said Letizia. “Then what do you think about playing with her?”

“Th-That’s too much! Y-You don’t have to do that!” said Rosalind, putting her hands up, completely bewildered at how the conversation had spiraled.

Her reaction was only natural. Playing a duet with an unbelievably handsome son of a duke in front of so many people would be terrifying, unless you happened to be one of those ambitious ladies who hoped to marry up. Rosalind would probably have felt much more at ease playing with Alexander's mother, the Duchess of Coverdale, whom she was connected with through Portia.

Amy and Rosalind had become friends through their love of cats and their shared interests, and they both had similar feelings toward love and marriage. Neither were yet engaged nor did they wish to be.

Rosalind loved books, and her dream was to remain unmarried and become a librarian. But recently, her parents and the lady of the house she was staying at had started recommending various bachelors to her.

"Really?" asked Alec. "It's truly not—"

"Alec," interrupted Edward, "the twice-weekly music classes are at the same time as Sir Dion's magic practicums, aren't they? You should be able to get the minimum credit, even if you miss some classes for this."

"—any trouble or anything," Alec finished. "Do you have the sheet music on you now?"

Alexander didn't look very excited, but at Edward's convincing appeal, he got up from his chair.

"Huh? Oh...yes," said Rosalind. "Here it is."

"All right, then! The recital is at the end of this month, so that gives me two weeks... I should be able to swing it."

"What?! R-Really?!"

"Of course. Well, looks like I'm busy, Ed. I'll leave Jahal's tour of the school to you."

"I-I-I need just a moment!"

"Sure, I understand."

There wasn't anyone in the Royal Academy who would pass up the opportunity to miss Sir Dion's lessons for legitimate reasons. Alexander had accepted the sheet music with a smile and was now jovially humming to himself

as he thumbed through the pages.

Rosalind, who was always a calm, stable presence in their group, was all aflutter, unable to grasp what had just happened. Amy felt a little privileged to have been able to see something so rare!

“Well! We should have just asked Alec from the beginning,” said Amy.

“You can breathe a little easier now, can’t you, Rosalind?” asked Letizia.

“Amy... Letty... What should I do? I’m still nervous, just now for a different reason!”

Before she could change her mind, Alexander quickly helped Rosalind to her feet, and they headed toward the professor’s office to tell him the news.

While secretly thinking Rosalind resembled a lamb being carried off to slaughter, Amy and Letizia watched her leave, smiling and waving at her as she frequently looked back at them.

“We should get going soon, too, huh?” asked Amy, turning to Letty.

“I probably should have asked earlier, Ed...,” said Jahal. “But can’t Letty be the one who gives me a tour of the school?”

“I have class after this!” she protested.

“What a cruel twist of fate!”

Letizia said a few parting words, but then Jahal suddenly pulled her back by the hand and planted a magnificent kiss on his fiancée’s soft cheek.

Amy, about to shout in surprise, put a hand over her mouth, the other over her eyes, and froze, peeking through a gap between her fingers.

Letizia was speechless.

“It’s a good luck charm to repel bugs, Letty!” Jahal claimed.

As Amy was appreciating the beautiful way Letizia was turning the color of a red rose, a tart appeared in front of her. Without a moment’s hesitation, Amy leaned forward and ate it.

As she chewed, Jahal descended from the terrace into the courtyard. Edward stood up to follow him and smiled at the two girls.

“Well, I’ll see you later, Amy. Letizia, I’ll look after Prince Jahal.”

“I-It’s not like he’s mine or anything!”

“Maybe we should just leave it at that, then. Ladies...”

Letizia and Amy curtsied at the retreating figures of the two princes.

“Letty...,” Amy said under her breath. “I *heard* him kiss you!”

Letizia jumped.

“Wh...? Amy! So should I just blurt out who fed you that tart just now?!”

Amy gasped.

“What?!”

Amy had had both of her hands covering her face... And it was impossible that the tart could have just flown into her mouth on its own... Naturally, *someone* had fed it to her!

As she realized this, she suddenly felt so hot she thought steam might start rising from the top of her head.

After the two girls ran off to class, the ladies remaining in the lounge felt so sweetened by the scene, it was as if they had been drizzled in honey.



THE grounds of the Royal Academy were large. There were several buildings with classrooms for learning, buildings predominately used for practicums and training sessions, and professors’ laboratories. There were also other facilities, like libraries, lounges, and dining halls, and the student dormitories were at the perimeter of the grounds.

Except for one tower, almost all the buildings were low-rise, so they were arranged spaciouly across the expansive grounds. The huge garden had a large pond and a greenhouse, and it was surrounded by a well-maintained walking path. The students studying horsemanship also rode there.

It would have been impossible to show Jahal everything in half a day, so Edward took him around the most important locations.

“The magic training building is here. The practice field for sword fighting is

that building with the blue roof on the other side.”

“Oh, here? Whoa, you guys have a strong defensive barrier.”

At a glance, the building just looked like an ordinary building for magic training, but it had been enchanted with powerful defensive magic. Jahal had picked up on this right away. Edward looked at him with some surprise. The Kingdom of Bakr placed such cultural importance on swordsmanship that magic shouldn’t have been his strong suit.

Jahal shrugged lightly and looked up, amused by Edward’s surprise.

“There’s been more emphasis placed on magic in my kingdom recently. But I’m really just here to observe—I’m not very good at using it.”

“I see. But Sir Dion’s class is included in your curriculum, isn’t it?”

“Ah... Well, I suppose.”

It looked as though news of the Demon Professor—the one Alexander had so gleefully run away from—had even reached ears in foreign kingdoms.

Jahal sighed and explained that because of all the trouble it had taken for him to enroll here as a special case, he had been given strict orders to learn as much as possible before returning home.

“I can’t hear a thing coming from the building... Are classes still going on?”

“Yes. In fact, that’s the building your fiancée should be in for her class.”

“Letty’s really good at magic,” said Jahal, puffing out his chest as if his fiancée’s skills were his own. “Amy must be in class, too.”

Edward nodded.

“Letty had told me in her letters that Amy could do healing magic, but I was shocked to learn the extent of her skill. I had no idea her skills were that legit. I really thought she was, at best, just playing pretend, and then afterward they’d get normal medical care.”

“It’s more effective on animals,” Edward noted.

“Yeah, Rosalind mentioned that earlier. You must really like her, huh?”

Even as they left and headed to the next location, they continued talking

about magic and the girls in their lives who were good at it.

“So, how was it actually meeting Letty’s friends?” Edward asked.

“Rosalind was exactly what I had pictured, but Amy was more of a mixed bag. Letty’s letters had quickly become more flattering toward her, so I couldn’t help wondering what she was all about.”

High-ranking aristocrats were typically genetically related somewhere along the line, and Letty’s father, Marquess Elphinstone, was related to Alexander’s mother, Duchess Coverdale.

As soon as the Elphinstone family had returned to Luducia, they paid a friendly visit to the duchess. At that time, it was only natural that Amy Northland, her “favorite cat companion” and “Letty’s would-be classmate,” would be brought up in conversation.

The duchess spoke very favorably about her, but Letizia didn’t initially have a very good impression of Amy. Part of the reason was that, although Amy was the granddaughter of Margrave Wallum, a heavyweight in aristocratic circles, she was really just the daughter of an earl.

The fact that she was the only remaining fiancée candidate for Prince Edward and had been in limbo in that position for so long had always stuck with Letizia. To be a fiancée candidate for that long without making any progress... Letizia couldn’t help wondering if there was something wrong with her. All the rumors she had heard about Amy had been negative, although most of them were digs about her appearance.

It seemed as though her cousin Alexander liked Amy, too. Her cousin was generally very capable and followed a personal rule (especially toward women) to treat everyone with a friendly attitude and an impartial mind. Letizia could tell from every word that he had a special fondness for her.

Plus, if she could be friends with Sir Dion, it was natural to be suspicious of what kind of a person she was.

Letizia frequently visited the royal palace at the Kingdom of Bakr during her stay there, and she saw many games of politics and love up close and in person.

Letizia dared not say it in front of Duchess Coverdale, but she was suspicious

that, at the behest of Margrave Wallum, Amy was currying favor with the duchess, leading both Prince Edward and Alexander around by the nose, and hatching some evil plan. She had shared these suspicions in her letters to Jahal. But the letters had also shown that, ever since meeting Amy in person, Letizia's suspicions had dwindled day by day until they had vanished completely.

"Letty said that the first time she saw Amy, she had been healing a student's injuries in class. Were you there, too, Ed?"

"No, I was at the royal palace that day. I heard about it afterward, though."

It had been a few days after Amy had started going to the Royal Academy, and it was the first time she had used her healing magic in school.

On that day, a captain of the Order of Knights had visited the school. His proposal for a special contest had been accepted by the students of the swordsmanship class, and their lesson for the day became a contest of real combat.

The students confident in their combat skills and those who wanted to join the Order of Knights had unanimously raised their hands, and it was true that they had a fruitful class, but naturally, there were more injuries than usual.

The captain fought against the students. Naturally, he took it a little easy on them. There hadn't been any broken bones or gashes that needed stitches, and most of the injuries were minor. One of the students who got injured was a younger friend of Harold's, whom Amy had met before.

She had passed by the boy by chance and had offered to heal him. When the other students saw her healing him without leaving the faintest scar, they all clambered over to ask her to heal them, too. Amy continued to do so until Sir Dion realized what was going on—and then a sharp look made the boys scatter away from her in all directions.

Although Amy had been pale in the face, on the verge of depleting her magical powers, she had continued to heal them with a reassuring smile. She didn't refuse a single person, always prompting the next person who needed help to come forward. Letizia had watched the entire thing from a distance.

"Letizia wrote recently that she's been worried that Amy is too generous."

“Yes, well... That’s true,” admitted Edward.

When it came to situations regarding animals or healing magic, Amy often didn’t look after herself as well as she should. Edward had noticed this himself not long after he started seeing her regularly.

“I don’t want her to overdo it, though,” Edward continued.

“But she won’t stop, will she?”

Edward chuckled at Jahal’s perceptive observation. Amy wasn’t usually self-assertive, but Edward had noticed she was stubborn when it came to healing magic. Or rather...Amy felt compelled to use her powers as much and as often as she could.

The number of people who were able to perform healing magic was limited, so for the kingdom’s sake, Amy’s powers were very welcome. But Edward wouldn’t want someone to use healing magic so much that they ended up hurting themselves—especially if that person was the girl he loved.

Even so, Edward couldn’t push back too strongly against it, because when Amy used her magic to help others, she looked so full of life. That was one of the reasons she gave when Edward had previously asked her in a roundabout way if she felt her healing magic was a burden.

“Being able to heal people with my magic makes me really happy,” she had said. “Of course, it’s nice when people tell me they appreciate it, but it’s not just that... It kind of gives me peace of mind. It reassures me that I really exist here, in this present moment.”

They had been at the royal riding grounds then. Amy had spoken quietly as she petted the horses that came up to her, almost as if she were talking to herself.

Being that he was the Third Prince, Edward’s parents hadn’t been sure how to deal with him growing up. By contrast, the Northland family must have cherished Amy and raised her with love.

There shouldn’t have been any question that that was true, considering the personalities of the Earl and Countess of Northland, whom he occasionally met, but Edward was bewildered by the way Amy spoke...like she felt uneasy about

her own existence.

As if she hadn't realized what she'd said, she immediately started talking about something else, her face totally impassive.

However, that sense of discomfort was enough to linger in Edward's heart.

It had been four years since Edward had first seen her face.

Over those years, she had opened her heart up to him quite a bit, but there was still an invisible line in the sand that he was never allowed to cross.

Amy's obsessions were animals and healing magic.

The final key to her heart was definitely hiding there.

And because Edward had realized this, he couldn't force Amy to stop using her magic.

Of course, Edward had done everything he could think of to make sure nothing went badly, and that wasn't even accounting for the presence of Sir Dion, the high magician who was like a second grandfather to her.

"If you're that worried, why not just force the engagement?"

"If only I could," said Edward.

"Huh?"

"You didn't just come down here as the prince. You came down here because you wanted to win Lady Letizia's heart, didn't you?" Edward asked smoothly.

Prince Jahal raised his eyebrows, then smiled.

"Guilty as charged. Let's give it all we've got, then."

"Yeah."

"But I won't lose, you know. I've got a head start—*my* engagement is already decided!"

"It's not a competition, Jahal."

"Really? Well... Yeah, you're probably right."

Then the two princes strolled around the grounds shoulder to shoulder until the bell rang announcing the end of class.

Intermission: A Prior Day in the Kingdom of Bakr

BUILDINGS painted with spiraling arabesque patterns towered upward under the endless blue sky. From the tall, rounded ceilings to the cool stone floors, every inch of them was covered with detailed patterns. Fresh spring water flowed into a courtyard with ivy-twined arches, and soft water droplets glistened on the trees.

The royal palace of Bakr is like an oasis in the desert...

Marquess Elphinstone, the coordinator with the Kingdom of Luducia, where Bakr's First Princess was to be married, lived with his family in one of the small palaces.

"A present for you, Lady Letizia," said one of Letizia's maids. She was wearing the clothes of this kingdom and was politely holding out a basket covered by a cloth.

"...From Prince Jahal, right?"

Letizia took the basket, assuming it was rare, exotic fruits again, but she was surprised at its unexpected lightness. Just then, she started feeling vibrations—something was moving inside the basket.

"Huh? What is this?" she asked.

"The prince said he was sure it would make you happy."

Letizia softly removed the cloth and saw a beautiful white fluffball. It had black spots all over its body and was squirming around restlessly. It briefly raised its face and revealed unexpectedly large, thin ears. The eyes glittering up at her were gooseberry green.

"...A cat?"

"Her name is Mimi."

"It's a cat, right?"

"Yes, it's a cat."

“Wh-Why would he spring this on me?!”

“Meow!”

The cat’s meow was smaller and higher pitched than a baby’s cooing, but Letizia looked terrified and started to tremble, as if a tiger had roared at her.

The maid looked at the master’s daughter with delight.

“It meowed!” cried Letizia.

“It did, my lady. Because it’s a cat.”

With a look of utter amazement, Letizia’s head whipped back and forth between the kitten in her hands and the maid.

“Wh-What should I do with it?”

“Love and cherish it.”

“No, I—I know, but—not that, I mean— Ah! What should I do?! It moved!”

“It did, my lady. Because it’s a cat.”

Letizia had frozen in place, still holding the basket. When the maid finally broke into giggles, Letizia was too paralyzed with fear to chide her.

“This was the best reaction to all his gifts so far!” said the maid. “I’m sure this will make Prince Jahal happy, too.”

“That’s not the point—”

“Meow!”

“It meowed again!”

“It did, my lady. Like I told you, it’s a cat.”

Letizia had never actually had a pet before. Until then, her life in this kingdom had been overwhelming and directionless, but after that day, things changed drastically.

Intermission: International Cat Day

“OH my word! I can’t miss this opportunity... *Gramps!*”

The elderly head butler came over to the Duchess of Coverdale, who had been reading the Cat Club magazine in the drawing room of her home. She suddenly stood up and started firing off instructions to the butler.

“...I see,” said the butler, nodding along as his mistress’s intentions became clear. “It would be my pleasure, Your Grace. You can leave everything to me.”

Both the butler and the maids in the room brightened with anticipation at the duchess’s plan.

“And don’t forget to prepare her favorite sweets, okay?”

“Not to worry, Your Grace.”

“Why don’t we invite Alec, too? Oh, yes... August 8 will be very exciting, indeed!”

The duchess scurried off to the letterpress at once. When the letter had been prepared and several copies had been drawn up, the duchess looked over them with a satisfied smile.



“SO...it’s International Cat Day?”

“You didn’t know about it either, Isabelle, so it must not be widely known! Actually, I only learned about it from this column here,” said the duchess, flipping open the magazine.

Camilla, the Duchess of Coverdale, and Isabelle, the Countess of Northland, were sitting elegantly together in Camilla’s cat room, enjoying tea together.

Isabelle’s daughter, Amy, had for some time now been hidden from view, surrounded by partition screens. They could occasionally hear her cry out in protest, “Hey, wait!” or “You’ve got to be kidding me!” or “Th-This can’t be

real!”

But her protests were dwarfed by the encouraging voices of the maids saying, “It’ll be fine!” or “You look perfect!” or “Come now!”

Outside of the partition screens, neither the duchess nor Amy’s own mother looked like they were going to put a stop to things. The only one who looked concerned was Tigger, who paced anxiously around the enclosure of screens, looking for Amy.

It was then that Alexander, the duchess’s son, entered the room.

“I’m home, Mother. Hello, Lady Northland. So...why did you want me here?”

“Oh, Alec! Put this on,” she said, casually handing him a thick gold ribbon.

“Mother...?” Alec said doubtfully.

“Nice! Very pretty,” said someone. Edward suddenly poked his head out from behind Alexander. “I heard there was something fun going on here, so I followed him!” he added cheerfully.

Edward’s and Alexander’s families were related by blood, and as childhood companions and playmates, the two of them had gone over to each other’s houses so often that it was not unusual for one of them to pop up unannounced.

The duchess became even more pleased and thought this surprise addition to the party was perfect.

“I’ll fetch something for you to wear, too, Your Highness! Gramps, we have another one, don’t we?”

“Yes, Your Grace. It’s right here.”

He bowed and handed the prince a black ribbon. Both ribbons had matching accessories attached to them—two bouncy triangles.

The triangles on the gold ribbon were an orangey-brown color, and the black ribbon had triangles of dark brown. They looked just like large cat ears with incredibly realistic fur attached to them.

“Mother, could you please tell me what on earth is going on?” Alexander

asked. Although he was smiling, the corners of his mouth twitched.

The duchess simply wafted her folding fan elegantly, looking completely unbothered.

“Well, today is International Cat Day, after all.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of such a thing. And?”

“I figured we ought to do something to help spread awareness about this day and the cause of rescuing cats, so I thought I’d have a painting commissioned of some cats! But just an ordinary painting would be a little boring, don’t you think?”

Following the duchess’s eyes toward the back of the room, the boys saw a hired painter standing quietly, art supplies in hand.

“I see what you’re getting at, I suppose, but I absolutely refuse to— *Hey!* Gramps! You can’t just put that thing on me without permission!”

In the blink of an eye, the crafty butler had slipped behind Alexander and firmly secured the cat ears to his head. Alexander’s blond hair matched the ribbon so perfectly it seemed to vanish, giving the impression that bright tawny cat ears had magically sprung out of his smooth, golden hair.

“It looks so good on you!” cooed the duchess. “Though I’d expect nothing less from the best designer in the royal capital! It will be fine, dear... I’ll have the painting done in a way that no one can be identified.”

“You’ve got to be jokin— Ed?! Have you lost your mind?!”

Refusing the mirror that was handed to him, Alexander caught a glimpse of the Third Prince of Luducia chipperly tying the ribbon on his head.

“It looks lovely, Your Highness,” said Isabelle.

“Thank you, Lady Northland.”

The saddle brown ears complemented Edward’s dark blond hair perfectly. Absolutely dumbstruck by the sight of his childhood friend, who seemed rather pleased by this whole thing, Alexander collapsed onto the sofa. He finally resigned to the fact that there was no point arguing about anything his mother said regarding cat-related matters.

As he gazed at the scene from the couch, something stood out to him.

“Wait...if Lady Northland is here, then does that mean...?”

“Th-This is terrible! I can’t possibly be seen like this!” a familiar voice rang from behind the partition screens, half warbled with tears.

“That’s right!” said the duchess. “Amy’s not just wearing the ears, though—I had her wear the whole thing!”

Whole thing? What’s the “whole thing”?

The duchess flashed a bright smile and started giggling to herself, and Lady Northland sipped calmly at her tea. The spasm returned to Alexander’s cheeks.

The maids started trying to mollify Amy one by one.

“It’s not terrible, Amy!”

“That’s right, it’s perfect!”

“It’s actually precious!”

It was clear that each of the maids truly believed what they were saying, but their encouragement didn’t seem to get through to Amy—they heard her grumbling back in response.

Amy had finished changing into her costume some time ago, but she hadn’t shown any sign of coming out from behind the partitions.

“I put on ears, too, Amy.”

“Is that Ed? Wh-What is he doing here at a time like this?! This just gets worse and worse!”

There was a loud clatter from behind the screens as Amy was startled by Edward’s voice. It seemed as though Tigger’s patience had run out, as he then got on his hind legs and put his front paws against one of the screens, which started wobbling precariously.

“Watch out!”

“Ah!”

Edward managed to grab Tigger, but Alexander, who rushed over, was just

too late to catch the screen in time.

It fell over with a clatter, revealing the scene behind it to the rest of the party.

The maids who had protected Amy from the falling screen quickly moved out of the way when they were sure she hadn't been hurt, revealing Amy, teary-eyed and hunched over on herself. She had covered her head with her hands in surprise, but when she removed them, she revealed two triangular ears, the same shade of black as her hair.

She wore a short-sleeved black dress with a round neckline that hugged her collarbone. Her soft, snow-white upper arms were totally uncovered. Her gloves came up to her elbows and even had pink cat toe pads on the fingertips. The lightly billowing skirt only reached her knees, and the rest of her legs were covered in black tights. There was an upright cat tail coming out of her lower back.

With so much black in the ensemble, Amy's golden eyes, wet with embarrassment, and the red choker around her neck especially stood out.

"My goodness, it's so *cute*!" Camilla squealed. "You capture the haughty nobility and the mysterious charm of a black cat perfectly! I was torn between black velvet and a gold bell for around the neck, but Isabelle's suggestion was best after all!"

"A female black cat needs a red ribbon—that much is nonnegotiable," said Isabelle, nodding along with the duchess.

Edward and Alexander couldn't take their eyes off Amy either, but perhaps for a different reason...

"M-Mom...! Duchess Camilla!" Amy groaned.

Wh-What do I even hide?! My ears? Tails? Legs? Arms?

She let out a whine that unintentionally sounded just like a cat meow, covered her beet-red face with her cat-paw hands, and slumped down on the floor.



For a while, Edward and Alexander just continued to stare at Amy with dumbfounded looks on their faces, but they both turned the same shade of red when they remembered that they were standing next to each other.

“U-Uh... That, um...looks good on you, Amy,” Edward stammered.

“That’s crazy. You really look like a black cat,” said Alec.

“I...might just die of embarrassment...”

Both boys took a step forward at the same time to help Amy to her feet.

At that moment, their path was blocked by a large object as Tigger slipped out of Edward’s inadvertently loosened grip and rushed out in front of them.

Hopping up on Amy’s lap, Tigger rubbed his body against her and meowed sweetly.

“Ah, this is just what I needed!” said Amy. “This is the best!”

The composition was perfect—a girl dressed up as a soft, chubby black cat was hugging a cat roughly her size. The duchess gave the scene a standing ovation, the maids in the room squealed with shrill voices, and even the old butler cracked a smile.

When the boys noticed the painter running over with his supplies, eyes sparkling, they swiftly grabbed each side of the fallen partition screen and raised it, blocking his view. The duchess complained loudly at this spectacular feat of teamwork.

“Boys, you just hid Amy!”

“It’s no good, Mother.”

“Ah—he doesn’t mean you’re not good, Amy, just that painting this isn’t good. Because it’s too adorable,” Edward explained to her over the screen with a smile. Amy turned bright red again and tried to hide her face in Tigger’s fur.

“What? We can’t paint it?” asked the duchess.

“I don’t think the Earl of Northland would agree to it being painted either,” Isabelle said reasonably.

“I think she’s right,” said Edward.

“You can’t paint it,” said Alec.

With that final swing of the hammer, the duchess slumped back down, dejected.

“And after I went and made everyone look so cute...”

“It’s water under the bridge now,” said Isabelle. “Let’s forget about the painting and focus on committing this moment to our memories instead! Amy, aren’t you glad these cat boys were here to save you?”

There was a cry in response from the other side of the partition, but no one was sure if it came from Amy or Tigger.

Alexander suddenly remembered with a start that he was still wearing the orange cat ears and ripped them off. By contrast, Prince Edward looked happily on, musing that the cat ears matched his coloring very well. On that day, August 8, the party enjoyed the rest of their evening in the duchess’s cat room.



THE painter slumped his shoulders, overflowing with creative energy but with nowhere to channel it. Several days later, however, the Duchess of Coverdale may or may not have been presented with a certain painting in secret...

Side Story: Another Look at the Tea Party

THE sounds of gentle commotion rode a stray breeze into the royal palace.

The endless blue sky was dotted with fluffy white clouds. The beautiful garden, with its multicolored flowers, vivid green foliage, and clear, babbling water fountain, had been temporarily thrown into chaos at the appearance of Prince Edward, but everyone had now regained their composure...except, that is, for Amy.

I just c-can't get used to calling him...E-Ed!

It was only the second time (the first being with Alexander) that Amy had called a male nonrelative by their given name.

With Alexander, at least Tigger had been there to help compensate the nerves she felt over her lack of experience, but the cat wasn't here now, nor did this situation play out with the same urgency as the last one had.

Nevertheless, if this was a request from the prince himself, there was certainly no way she could ignore it.

And he told me to call him a nickname right off the bat, just like Alexander did!

Amy couldn't help wondering if boys in this world simply preferred being referred to so casually. But the only boys Amy had interacted with around her age had been her brother and his friends, so she couldn't judge whether that was normal.

"Is something wrong?" asked Edward.

"Uh, no, um... Nothing's wrong," said Amy. When she looked down, her own shadow fell over her teacup.

"You were saying something before, weren't you? I apologize for interrupting you."

"I-It's fine!" she stammered. "Um... Oh, that's right! Your High— I mean, Ed... I was just hoping to hear more about your dog."

When she looked up, her eyes locked onto Ed's, and his gray eyes seemed to bore straight into her. She picked up on the tenderness she saw there and felt her cheeks flush.

"Yes, that..."

As if wondering where to begin, Edward lightly rested his hand on his chin. To preemptively keep him from changing the subject to something other than animals, Amy took the lead in the conversation in a rare move.

"What's his name?"

Edward looked surprised for a moment but soon settled into his gentle expression once more.

"Jet."

"Does that mean he's a jet-black dog?"

"That's right. His ears drooped just a little, and his whole body was pitch black, but there was a little white patch at the base of his neck, so it looked like he was wearing a scarf."

Edward drew a little triangle on his own chest with a finger. From how he described Jet, she assumed he was a shepherd breed of some kind.

"He sounds so cute!"

Amy's eyes lit up as she imagined him, and Edward smiled sadly.

"He was a big dog with pretty intimidating features, so most people were afraid of him."

"Were afraid of him...?" Amy asked, finally starting to process the sadness that tinged his tone.

"He passed away when I was nine years old."

"Oh... I-I'm so sorry..."

"It's okay; don't feel bad. It was of old age."

"But..."

It suddenly clicked inside Amy's brain that he had been using the past tense...

She wanted to travel back in time and shake herself for being so dense and not even noticing...

From Edward's smile, she sensed that the emotional scars from Jet's passing had not totally healed yet... Her chest tightened.

He must have really loved that dog.

The greater the happiness that had been shared, the greater the loss would be. His memories of Jet wouldn't vanish, no matter how long he lived. Amy had known this in theory her whole life, but she had really internalized it after getting Tigger and experiencing that love for herself.

She was at a loss for words. Edward tried smiling again.

"Jet was originally my brother's guard dog. By the time I got him, he was already pretty up there in age."

Edward explained how Jet had sustained an injury while protecting his brother that had caused one of his hind legs to limp. Unable to run at full speed, Jet had become unfit to guard the First Prince.

When talks of putting him down came around, it had been Marvin who put a hold on the decision.

By that time, the young Edward had been a frequent visitor of the riding grounds, and all the caretakers knew about his love for animals.

It was clear to Marvin that Edward would be devastated if he heard that his brother's guard dog had been put down. He also thought Edward, who was in a difficult position as the Third Prince, probably needed a nonhuman companion he could talk to freely about anything.

And Jet hadn't become a complete invalid—he could perform many of the skills he had picked up as a guard dog.

Unlike his older siblings, Edward was never a mischievous boy. He wasn't prone to suddenly running off or anything like that. Even though Jet couldn't run, he could protect Edward well enough. It was a stroke of good fortune that the dog had been adopted by the Third Prince and escaped a forced retirement.

Amy nodded and listened along, feeling as though she were reliving the

memories with him.

“What kind of a dog was Jet?”

“Well, his parents were—”

“No, like... What was he like? Did he eat everything? Did he like chewing up slippers?”

“What?”

“Would he go crazy in the snow? Or, uh...did he...not?”

Amy had talked over him with her questions, and this time Edward did not hide his astonished expression.

What? Did I ask something weird?

A long time ago—or rather, in her past life—her mother told her that the dog she had growing up would do things like that.

Amy still didn’t know much about what dogs were like in this world. She had plenty of questions—she really wanted to know how they were similar and different—but she didn’t think now was the time or place for them.

Maybe they’re really strict with training the dogs that live in the palace, so maybe they don’t chew on or hide slippers...? Was that rude of me to suggest?

But before Amy could start to get seriously anxious, Edward opened his mouth—and he looked like he was trying very hard to keep from grinning.

“He was trained well, so he never really acted out, but he did seem to get worried when it would snow.”

“Really?!”

“He would get really happy when I’d take him outside. And then...yeah, I remember. He would surprise himself awake with his own snoring sometimes.”

Amy laughed. “What a cutie, just as I suspected!”

A large, powerful guard dog that would get so worried about the weather, his tail would start twitching... Jumping awake from his own snoring... Just imagining it made her heart melt!

“...You don’t care about his pedigree, do you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry! What was that?” Amy asked, slightly panicked. She had been so lost in her thoughts imagining Jet, she hadn’t heard what he said.

Edward shook his head.

“It’s nothing. I was just reminded of how hard it was to brush him during shedding season...”

Amy’s eyes shone and she listened attentively as Edward’s memories of Jet spilled out, eventually blending into stories of his current horse.

Amy was the first person he had ever met who wanted to hear about his genuine memories with Jet more than anything else, not information about his birth or pedigree.

And with that, another key had opened to Edward’s heart.

Amy and Edward continued to babble about animals until, before long, a maid checked her watch and approached them.

“Unfortunately, it seems our time together is up,” Edward said. “You’ll meet Ventus next time.”

“O-Okay!”

In that moment, when they parted ways, Amy hadn’t realized she had casually promised to meet him again.

Amy’s mother, however, had certainly understood his meaning, and was blinking repeatedly in shock. He gently bowed his head to her and stood, trying to conceal his regret at having to leave.

Afterword

ONE day, an image suddenly popped into my head—a chubby girl hugging a huge, fluffy cat.

The girl beamed at the cat, and they seemed to be very good friends. I couldn't help smiling at her glittering eyes and her full cheeks, the spitting image of health and vitality.

As the girl played happily with some cats, I envisioned her surrounded by other friends—dogs, birds, and of course other people, too.

Ah...how nice, I thought.

It made me want to write a peaceful, happy story of humans and animals living in harmony, and that was how this novel began.

When I published this story on a web novel site, I had no idea it would one day be translated into English and become a book, able to be held and read by other people. It was a very happy surprise!

I would like to thank everyone who has helped me in the writing and publishing process.

I'd first like to thank Charis Messier from Cross Infinite World, as well as everyone involved in editing and translating. This story never could have become a book without your help and support. I'm incredibly grateful for everything you've done.

I'd also like to thank the illustrator, Hinano Chano. The cover illustration you drew was exactly the image that had popped into my mind at the very beginning. Thank you so much for drawing the color character page and for all the other illustrations, too. The facial expressions are so animated, the clothes so wonderful, the animals so adorable... Your gorgeous illustrations decorate this novel beautifully!

Lastly, I'd like to thank my family and friends, who have always watched over

my creative endeavors. Everyone has helped me so much, and I'm so thrilled to have been able to make this book a reality.

I hope readers will enjoy Amy's story. She may have been thrown for a loop at being reincarnated, but she enjoys fulfilling the dream she never could in her previous life—living with a cat!

-Kosuzu Kobato



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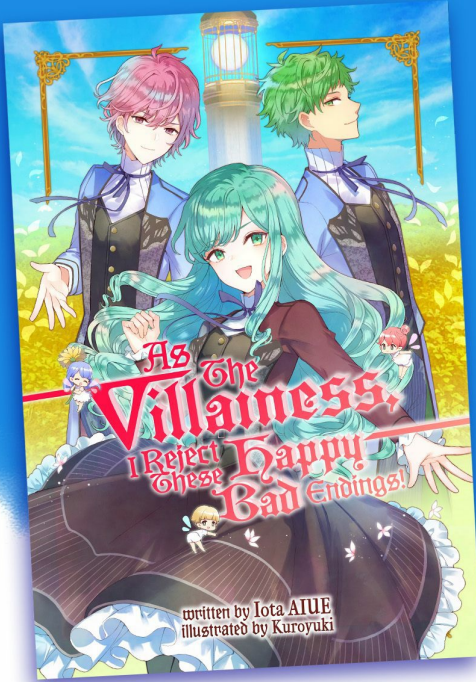


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